

G8 summit: major powers discuss how to contain “Arab Spring”

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The G8 summit opened in France Thursday with discussion on a response to the so-called “Arab Spring” that has seen mass uprisings against Western-backed regimes.

The two-day meeting is being held under the shadow of the sharpening global crisis of capitalism, including the sovereign debt crisis in Europe and the ballooning US debt, which has now surpassed \$14 trillion.

The draft statement prepared for the summit includes pledges from the Europeans to confront fiscal crises within the European Union with “determination”, while it calls on the Obama administration to develop a “clear and credible medium-term fiscal consolidation framework.”

In both cases this means the implementation of brutal austerity against working people on both sides of the Atlantic, which will inevitably provoke mass protests and resistance of the kind that have already swept Spain, Greece and other countries.

Despite the bland language of G8 diplomacy and the pretense of common purpose, this latest summit only underscores the inability of the major Western capitalist powers to devise any coordinated response to the financial crisis that has shaken the world economy since September 2008.

Among the principal concerns expressed by the Obama administration was that the debt crisis gripping the weaker members of the European Union is driving down the value of the euro, interfering with American capitalism’s attempt to increase its export earnings.

Under these conditions, the opening day’s focus on a major aid program ostensibly aimed at supporting the “Arab spring” and the growth of “democracy” in the Middle East and North Africa seemed incongruous. In reality, however, no firm figures appeared likely in relation to new aid, and given the G8’s record, whatever promises are made are not likely to be kept.

The principal aim of the so-called aid program is to utilize the upheavals in the Arab world to carry out an even greater penetration of their economies by Western capital and to prop up regimes that will support US and Western European interests while quelling the uprising of the masses.

Among those invited to the summit were the Prime Ministers of Tunisia and Egypt—Prime Minister Beji Caid el Sebsi and Essam Sharaf—who took power following the mass rebellions that toppled the dictatorships of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak earlier this year.

On the eve of the summit, Tunisian Employment Minister Said Aydi said that his government was hoping that the G8 leaders would propose a “major support plan” of around \$25 billion for Tunisia alone. The figures being discussed for both Egypt and Tunisia are a fraction of that amount.

The member states of the G8 have stressed that the bulk of the financial packages prepared for Tunisia and Egypt should be handled through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and be tied to economic restructuring programs.

World Bank President Robert Zoellick announced on Thursday that the two countries could expect “up to \$6 billion” in new funding from the bank depending upon their progress in “modernizing” their economies.

David Lipton, the US National Security Council’s director for international economic affairs, said that Washington was relying on the IMF to provide the assistance to the region’s economies. IMF programs, he said, “will take care of the problem that Egypt and Tunisia face in the short term.”

The US had earlier announced a \$2 billion aid package directed principally to Egypt, which is indebted to the US government by more than \$3 billion and has a total foreign debt of over \$35 billion.

Britain, meanwhile, said it is planning a paltry \$175 million in new aid for the “transition to democracy” in the region, with this total sum to be paid out over four years from already existing budgets for foreign assistance. Germany has pledged a similar amount, also to be paid out over a number of years.

The leaders of the major powers delivered hypocritical remarks touting these miserly sums and proclaiming their support for the “Arab spring.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the Bundestag before leaving for the summit in France that it was “self-evident” that Germany would support those in Tunisia and Egypt who had “risked their lives for the acquisition of democracy and freedom.” She said she would urge other leaders of the G8 to “ensure that the initial political progress is not endangered by economic instability.”

Merkel in particular suggested that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) could be redirected toward the economies of the Middle East and North Africa.

The EBRD was created in 1991 to direct capitalist foreign direct investment into the economies of Eastern Europe following the liquidation of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Stalinist regimes throughout the region. This process, in which foreign capital poured in to take advantage of cheap labor and the fire sale of state property, left the region defenseless against the world economic crisis that broke out in September 2008, when the rapid outflow of this same foreign capital led to the collapse of national economies in the region.

British Prime Minister David Cameron made his own statement at the summit, declaring that support was needed in order to forestall a further radicalization of the masses and to prevent an increase in immigration from the region to Western Europe.

For its part, the Obama administration directed a letter to the summit signed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner calling the events in the Middle East and North Africa “an historic opportunity.” It urged the G8 to “focus on trade, not just aid, and on investment, not just assistance,” and said that the principal goals should include “improving financial stability” and “integrating their markets with the region and the global economy.”

What Washington is seeking to create in Tunisia and Egypt are regimes that will continue upholding the interests of the US and its principal regional ally, Israel, while subordinating the countries’ economies to the profit interests of the US-based transnationals and systematically repressing the threat of social revolution.

In both countries, the regimes that are being consolidated around the Tunisian and Egyptian security forces are systematically suppressing political opposition, demonstrations and strikes. A mass rally has been called in Cairo’s Tahrir square today as a “Day of Rage” to denounce the military’s arrest and prosecution of demonstrators and its iron grip over the government.

The “free market” policies being promoted by Washington and its allies in Western Europe are an extension of policies responsible for the growth of social inequality and mass unemployment that fueled the mass uprisings earlier this year.

The opening day of the G8 summit heard calls for Yemen’s President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a longtime client of Washington, to step down after 33 years in power in an attempt to avoid a civil war in the impoverished country. There were also calls for the Syrian regime to end its military repression against demonstrations, but no call for the country’s President Bashar al-Assad to leave office.

The G8 remained silent on the violent repression unleashed by the ruling monarchy of Bahrain against the mass protest movement in that country. The regime, which hosts the US Fifth Fleet, has received tacit US support for the clampdown.

And there was also no joint statement on Libya, where the US and NATO are beginning their third month of a bombing campaign that has wreaked increasing destruction and loss of life in the North African country.

Before the war began, France attempted unsuccessfully to get a resolution through a G8 ministers meeting in support of a military intervention in the name of “protecting civilians.” Subsequently, Russia and Germany abstained on a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect civilians against repression by the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

On the eve of the summit, France and Britain revealed that they are deploying attack helicopters in a qualitative escalation of the imperialist intervention, while NATO warplanes have carried out successive nights of heavy bombardments of Tripoli, the Libyan capital.

Russia, which sees the US-NATO intervention as a direct threat to its own extensive interests in Libya’s oil and gas industry, has condemned the bombing as a violation of UN resolutions. It has stepped up its own diplomatic initiative, meeting with representatives of both the Libyan regime and the so-called rebels backed by Washington and NATO in an attempt to promote a cease-fire.

In the Libyan war, the real aim of the US and the Western European powers emerges clearly: the recolonization of the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Africa as part of an attempt to offset the deepening crisis of their economies.

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