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Debate : Libya, the resistance, the no-fly zone

Libya: a legitimate and necessary debate from an anti-imperialist perspective

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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The call of the Libyan insurrectionists in Benghazi for a "no-fly zone" and the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution 1973 that claimed to implement such a zone in order to "protect the civilian population" provoked a sharp discussion among anti-imperialists on what attitude to adopt. Here Gilbert Achcar responds to the debate following his remarks in an interview published in [International Viewpoint](#) and elsewhere arguing that it was not possible to oppose the UN motion. The Fourth International has adopted its own position ["Down with the Gaddafi regime! Stop the imperialist intervention now! Support the Libyan revolution!"](#)

"The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was indeed a compromise with the imperialists, but it was a compromise which, under the circumstances, had to be made. ... To reject compromises 'on principle', to reject the permissibility of compromises in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which it is difficult even to consider seriously ... One must be able to analyze the situation and the concrete conditions of each compromise, or of each variety of compromise. One must learn to distinguish between a man who has given up his money and fire-arms to bandits so as to lessen the evil they can do and to facilitate their capture and execution, and a man who gives his money and fire-arms to bandits so as to share in the loot."

Vladimir I. Lenin

The interview I gave to my good friend Steve Shalom the day after the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1973 and which was published on ZNet on March 19 provoked a storm of discussions and statements of all kinds – friendly, unfriendly, strongly supportive, mildly supportive, politely critical or frenziedly hostile – far larger than anything I could have expected, all the larger because it was translated and circulated into several languages. If this is an indication of anything, it is that people felt there was a real issue at stake. So let's discuss it.

The debate on the Libyan case is a legitimate and necessary one for those who share an anti-imperialist position, lest one believes that holding a principle spares us the need to analyze concretely each specific situation and determine our position in light of our factual assessment. Every general rule admits of exceptions. This includes the general rule that UN-authorized military interventions by imperialist powers are purely reactionary ones, and can never achieve a humanitarian or positive purpose. Just for the sake of argument: if we could turn back the wheel of history and go back to the period immediately preceding the Rwandan genocide, would we oppose an UN-authorized Western-led military intervention deployed in order to prevent it? Of course, many would say that the intervention by imperialist/foreign forces risks making a lot of victims. But can anyone in their right mind believe that Western powers would have massacred between half a million and a million human beings in 100 days?

This is not to claim that Libya is Rwanda: I'll explain in a moment why Western powers didn't bother about Rwanda, or don't bother about the death toll of genocidal proportions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but intervene in Libya. Reference to the Rwandan case is given here only to show that there is room for discussion of concrete cases, even though one adheres to firm anti-imperialist principles. The argument that Western intervention in Libya is bound to make civilian victims (I'd actually care even for Gaddafi's soldiers from a humanitarian perspective) is not determinative. What is decisive is the comparison between the human cost of this intervention and the cost that would have been incurred had it not happened.

To take another extreme analogy for the sake of showing the full range of discussion: could Nazism be defeated through non-violent means? Were not the means used by the Allied forces themselves cruel? Did they not savagely bomb Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing huge numbers of civilians? In hindsight, would we now say

that the anti-imperialist movement in Britain and the United States should have campaigned against their states' involvement in the world war? Or do we still believe that the anti-imperialist movement was right in not opposing the war against the Axis (as it was right indeed in opposing the previous one, the 1914-18 world war), but that it should have campaigned against any massive harm purposely inflicted upon civilian populations with no evident rationale of a necessity in order to defeat the enemy?

Enough now with analogies. They are always subject to endless debates, even though they serve the useful purpose of showing that there can be situations where there can be a debate, situations where you have to give up to bandits, or call the cops, etc. They show that the belief that any such attitudes should be automatically rejected as a "breach of principles," without taking the trouble of assessing the concrete circumstances, is just unsustainable. Otherwise, the anti-imperialist movement in Western countries would appear as only concerned with opposing their own governments without giving a damn about the fate of other populations. This is no longer anti-imperialism, but right-wing isolationism: the "let them all go to hell, and leave us in peace" attitude à la Patrick Buchanan. So let us calmly assess the concrete situation that we're dealing with these days.

We shall begin with the nature of Gaddafi's regime. The facts here leave little room for legitimate disagreement. It is only for the attention of those who believe, in good faith and out of sheer ignorance, that Gaddafi is a progressive and an anti-imperialist that I discuss it. True, Gaddafi started as a relatively progressive anti-imperialist populist dictator, who led a military coup against the Libyan monarchy in 1969 imitating the Egyptian coup that toppled the monarchy there in 1952. His first hero was Gamal Abdel-Nasser, although his regime was initially more right-wing ideologically, with much more emphasis on religion (later, Gaddafi pretended to give a new interpretation of Islam). He started very early on recruiting people from poorer countries as mercenaries in his armed forces, initially for the Islamic Legion that he set up.

He proclaimed the replacement of existing laws with the Sharia in the early 1970s, just before embarking on an imitation of the Chinese "cultural revolution," with his own Islamic version of Mao's Little Red Book: the Green Book. He also imitated the pretense of the "cultural revolution" of instituting "direct democracy," through the creation of a system of "popular committees" supposedly turning Libya into a "state of the masses" — actually one with a record proportion of people on the payroll of the security services. More than 10% of the Libyan population were "informants" paid for exerting surveillance over the rest of the society. Gaddafi extensively jailed or executed opponents to his regime, including several of the officers who had taken part along with him in the overthrow of the monarchy. In the late 1970s, he decided to turn the Libyan economy into a combination of state capitalism in large enterprises and private capitalism with workers' "partnership" in smaller ones and abolish rents and retail trade (even hairdressers were nationalized!). He also devoted part of the state's oil revenue to improving the living conditions of Libya's citizens, a "revolutionary" version of the way in which some of the Gulf monarchies with high per capita oil income cater to the needs of their own citizens in order to buy themselves a social constituency — while, as in Libya, mistreating the immigrant workers who constitute a major part of their labor force and their population.

In the next decade, faced with the disastrous results of his erratic policies and the crisis of the USSR, upon which he depended for his arms purchases, Gaddafi pretended to imitate Gorbachev's perestroika, liberalizing Libya's economy, but hardly its political life. His next major political turnabout took place in 2003. In December of that year, he came to the political rescue of Bush & Blair, announcing that he had decided to renounce his weapons of mass destruction programs. This was badly needed boost for the credibility of the invasion of Iraq as a way of halting WMD proliferation. Gaddafi was suddenly turned into a respectable leader and was warmly congratulated, with Condoleezza Rice citing him as a model. One after the other, Western leaders flocked to Libya paying him visits in his tent and concluding juicy contracts. The one who built the closest relation with him is Italian hard-right and racist prime minister Silvio Berlusconi: his friendship with Gaddafi was not only very fruitful economically. In 2008 they concluded one of the dirtiest deals of recent times, agreeing that poor boat people from the African continent intercepted by Italian naval forces while trying to reach European shores would be delivered directly to Libya instead of being taken to Italian territory, where they would have to be screened for asylum. This deal was so effective that it

reduced the number of such asylum-seekers in Italy from 36,000 in 2008 to 4,300 in 2010. It was condemned by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, to no avail.

The idea that Western powers are intervening in Libya because they want to topple a regime hostile to their interests is just preposterous. Equally preposterous is the idea that what they are after is laying their hands on Libyan oil. In fact, the whole range of Western oil and gas companies is active in Libya: Italy's ENI, Germany's Wintershall, Britain's BP, France's Total and GDF Suez, US companies ConocoPhillips, Hess, and Occidental, British-Dutch Shell, Spain's Repsol, Canada's Suncor, Norway's Statoil, etc. Why then are Western powers intervening in Libya today, and not in Rwanda yesterday and Congo yesterday and today? As one of those who have energetically argued that the invasion of Iraq was "about oil" against those who tried to outsmart us by saying that we were "reductionists," don't expect me to argue that this one is not about oil. It definitely is. But how?

My take on that is the following. After watching for a few weeks Gaddafi conducting his terribly brutal and bloody suppression of the uprising that started in mid-February – estimates of the number of people killed in early March ranged from 1000 to 10,000, the latter figure by the International Criminal Court, with the Libyan opposition's estimates ranging between 6,000 and 8,000 – Western governments, like everybody else for that matter, became convinced that with Gaddafi set on a counter-revolutionary offensive and reaching the outskirts of Libya's second largest city of Benghazi (over 600,000 inhabitants), a mass-scale slaughter was imminent. To give an indication of what such repressive governments can perpetrate, just think of the fact that the Syrian regime's 1982 repression of the uprising in the city of Hama, with less than one third of Benghazi's population, resulted in over 25,000 deaths. Had a massacre on a similar scale occurred with Gaddafi's rule consolidating as a result, Western governments would have had no choice but to impose sanctions and an oil embargo on his regime.

The conditions of the oil market that prevailed in the 1990s were characterized by a depression in prices, at a time when the US was going through its longest economic expansion ever, the bubble-sustained boom of the Clinton years. It was very comfortable for Washington and its allies to maintain an embargo on Iraq during that decade (at a quasi-genocidal cost). It is only at the end of the decade that the oil market started moving out of depression into a rise of prices that everything indicated to be of a structural nature, i.e. a long-term rising tendency. And it is no coincidence that George W. Bush and his cronies came out then in favour of "regime change" in Iraq. For it was the condition without which Washington wouldn't tolerate lifting the embargo on a country whose major oil deals had been granted to French, Russian and Chinese interests (the three leading opponents of the invasion at the UN Security Council – surprise, surprise!).

The present conditions of the world oil market are indeed conditions where oil prices, after falling briefly under the shock of the global crisis, have resumed their upward movement, several months before the revolutionary wave in North Africa and the Middle East. This, in a condition of unresolved global economic crisis, with an extremely fragile fake recovery. Under such conditions, an oil embargo on Libya is simply not an option. The massacre had to be prevented. The best scenario for Western powers became the fall of the regime, thus relieving them of the problem of coping with it. A lesser evil option for them would be a lasting stalemate and de facto division of the country between West and East, with oil exports resumed from both provinces, or exclusively from the main fields located in the East under rebel control.

To these considerations one should add the following: it is nonsensical, and an instance of very crude "materialism," to dismiss as irrelevant the weight of public opinion on Western governments, especially in this case on nearby European governments. At a time when the Libyan insurgents were urging the world more and more insistently to provide them with a no-fly zone in order to neutralize the main advantage of Gaddafi's forces, and with the Western public watching the events on television – making it impossible that a mass-scale slaughter in Benghazi would go unseen, as it was so often the case in other places (like the above-mentioned Hama, for instance, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo) – Western governments would not only have incurred the wrath of their citizens, but they would have completely jeopardized their ability to invoke humanitarian pretexts for further imperialist wars like the

ones in the Balkans or Iraq. Not only their economic interests, but also the credibility of their own ideology was at stake. And the pressure of Arab public opinion certainly played a role in the call by the Arab League of States for a no-fly zone over Libya, even though there can be no doubt that most Arab regimes were wishing that Gaddafi could put down the uprising, and thus reverse the revolutionary wave that has been sweeping the whole region and shaking their own regimes since the beginning of this year.

Now, what do we do with that? A mass uprising, facing an all-too-real threat of large-scale massacre was requesting a no-fly zone in order to help them resist the criminal regime's offensive. Unlike the anti-Milosevic forces in Kosovo, they were not calling for foreign troops to occupy their land. On the contrary, they had good reason for having no confidence in any such deployment: their awareness, in light of Iraq, Palestine, etc., that world powers have imperialist agendas, as well as their own experience of the way the same world powers cozied up to the tyrant oppressing them. They very explicitly rejected any foreign intervention on the ground, only asking for an air cover. And the UNSC resolution excluded explicitly upon their request "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory."

I won't dwell on the unacceptable arguments of those who try to shed doubt on the nature of the uprising's leadership. They are most often the same as those who believe Gaddafi is a progressive. The leaders of the uprising are a mix of political and intellectual democratic and human rights dissidents, some of whom have spent long years in Gaddafi's jails, men who broke with the regime in order to join the rebellion, and representatives of the regional and tribal diversity of the Libyan population. The program they are united on is one of democratic change — political freedoms, human rights, and free elections — exactly like all other uprisings in the region. And if there is no clarity about what a post-Gaddafi Libya might look like, two things are certain: it can't be worse than Gaddafi's regime, and it can't be worse than the quite more obvious likely scenario of a crucial role of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in post-Mubarak Egypt, given by some as an argument for supporting the Egyptian dictator.

Can anyone claiming to belong to the left just ignore a popular movement's plea for protection, even by means of imperialist bandit-cops, when the type of protection requested is not one through which control over their country could be exerted? Certainly not, by my understanding of the left. No real progressive could just ignore the uprising's request for protection — unless, as is too frequent among the Western left, they just ignore the circumstances and the imminent threat of mass slaughter, paying attention to the whole situation only once their own government got involved, thus setting off their (normally healthy, I should add) reflex of opposing the involvement. In every situation when anti-imperialists opposed Western-led military interventions using massacre prevention as their rationale, they pointed to alternatives showing that the Western governments' choice of resorting to force only stemmed from imperialist designs.

There was a non-violent solution out of the Kosovo crisis: for one, the offer made by Yeltsin's Russian government in August 1998 of an international force to implement a political settlement jointly imposed by Moscow and Washington. It was relayed by then US ambassador to NATO Alexander Vershbow, and just ignored in Washington. The same could be added about February 1999. The Serbian and NATO positions were different, but negotiable, as was shown after 78 days of bombing, when the UN resolution was a compromise between them. There was a non-violent solution to get Saddam Hussein to withdraw his troops from Kuwait in 1990: aside from the fact that he could not have withstood for long the tight sanctions that were imposed on his regime in order to force him out, he was offering to negotiate his withdrawal. Washington preferred to destroy the country's infrastructure and send it "back to the stone age," as the reporter for the UNSC described the country's situation after the war in 1991.

What then was the alternative to the no-fly zone in the Libyan case? None is convincing. The day when the UNSC voted its resolution, Gaddafi's forces were already on the outskirts of Benghazi, and his air force attacking the city. A few days more, they might have taken Benghazi. Those who are confronted with this question give very unconvincing answers. A political solution could have been contemplated had Gaddafi been willing to allow free elections, but he wasn't. He and his son Saif gave the uprising no choice other than surrender (promising them an amnesty that

nobody could have trusted), or "civil war." I'll ignore those who say that the population of Benghazi could have fled to Egypt and taken refuge there! It is not worthy of comment. I'll also ignore those who say that Arab armies only should have intervened, as if an intervention by the likes of the Egyptian and Saudi armed forces would have caused fewer casualties, and represented less imperialist influence on the process in Libya. The answer that sounds more convincing is the one advocating arms delivery to the insurgents; but it was not a plausible alternative.

Arms delivery could not be organized and become effective — especially if we're thinking of sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles — in 24 hours! This could not have been an alternative to a massacre foretold. Under such conditions, in the absence of any other plausible solution, it was just morally and politically wrong for anyone on the left to oppose the no-fly zone; or in other words, to oppose the uprising's request for a no-fly zone. And it remains morally and politically wrong to demand the lifting of the no-fly zone — unless Gaddafi is no longer able to use his air force. Short of that, lifting the no-fly zone would mean a victory for Gaddafi, who would then resume using his planes and crush the uprising even more ferociously than what he was prepared to do beforehand. On the other hand, we should definitely demand that bombings stop after Gaddafi's air means have been neutralized. We should demand clarity on what air potential is left with Gaddafi, and, if any is still at his disposal, what it takes to neutralize it. And we should oppose NATO turning into a full participant of the ground war beyond the initial blows to Gaddafi's armor needed to halt his troops' offensive against rebel cities in the Western province — even were the insurgents to invite NATO's participation or welcome it.

Does it mean that we had and have to support UNSC resolution 1973? Not at all. This was a very bad and dangerous resolution, precisely because it didn't define enough safeguards against transgressing the mandate of protecting the Libyan civilians. The resolution leaves too much room for interpretation, and could be used to push forward an imperialist agenda going beyond protection into meddling into Libya's political future. It could not be supported, but must be criticized for its ambiguities. But neither could it be opposed, in the sense of opposing the no-fly zone and giving the impression that one doesn't care about the civilians and the uprising. We could only express our strong reservations. Once intervention started, the role of anti-imperialist forces should have consisted in monitoring it closely, and condemning all actions hitting at civilians where measures to avoid such killings have not been observed, as well as all actions by the coalition that are devoid of a civilian protection rationale. One article of the UNSC resolution should definitely be opposed though: it is the one confirming the arms embargo on Libya, if this means the country and not the Gaddafi regime alone. We should on the contrary demand that arms be delivered openly and massively to the insurgents, so that they no longer need direct foreign military support as soon as possible.

A final comment: for so many years, we have been denouncing the hypocrisy and double standard of imperialist powers, pointing to the fact that they didn't prevent the all-too-real genocide in Rwanda while they intervened in order to stop the fictitious "genocide" in Kosovo. This implied that we thought that international intervention should have been deployed in order to prevent or stop the genocide in Rwanda. The left should certainly not proclaim such absolute "principles" as "We are against Western powers' military intervention whatever the circumstances." This is not a political position, but a religious taboo. One can safely bet that the present intervention in Libya will prove most embarrassing for imperialist powers in the future. As those members of the US establishment who opposed their country's intervention rightly warned, the next time Israel's air force bombs one of its neighbours, whether Gaza or Lebanon, people will demand a no-fly zone. I, for one, definitely will. Pickets should be organized at the UN in New York demanding it. We should all be prepared to do so, with now a powerful argument.

The left should learn how to expose imperialist hypocrisy by using against it the very same moral weapons that it cynically exploits, instead of rendering this hypocrisy more effective by appearing as not caring about moral considerations. They are the ones with double standards, not us.