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

Barack Obama's Libya Speech and the Tasks of Anti-Imperialists

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

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The speech delivered by Barack Obama on March 28 sheds interesting light on both the ongoing Western intervention in Libya and the debate that has been unfolding in the antiwar movement about it. What follows is a dissection of key sections of the speech – leaving aside the usual grandiloquent and empty rhetoric of the "manifest destiny" type – with a comment on both issues, ending with an assessment of the present situation twelve days after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and the tasks of anti-imperialists.

*"Mindful of the risks and costs of military action, we are naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when **our interests and values** are at stake, we have a responsibility to act. That is what happened in Libya over the course of these last six weeks...."*

"Some question why America should intervene at all – even in limited ways – in this distant land. They argue that there are many places in the world where innocent civilians face brutal violence at the hands of their government, and America should not be expected to police the world, particularly when we have so many pressing concerns here at home.

"It is true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs. And given the costs and risks of intervention, **we must always measure our interests against the need for action**. But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right. In this particular country – Libya; at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale." (emphasis mine throughout)

Interests are quite frankly put before values in the above passages. The truth is that U.S. imperial interests are what motivate U.S. intervention first and above all. Values are only secondary, when not mere window dressing, as the whole history of U.S. military interventions abundantly verifies. At times, U.S. interests may indeed coincide with U.S. proclaimed values, like in the U.S. participation in World War II, but most U.S. interventions took place in violation of U.S. proclaimed values whereas the U.S. abstained from upholding its proclaimed values in countless instances when they did not match its imperial interests.

"For more than four decades, the Libyan people have been ruled by a tyrant – Moammar Gaddafi. He has denied his people freedom, exploited their wealth, murdered opponents at home and abroad, and terrorized innocent people around the world – including Americans who were killed by Libyan agents."

That's absolutely true. And yet, the U.S. has been shamelessly cozying up to the tyrant since 2003, and not the Bush administration alone. On April 21, 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton received in Washington one of Gaddafi's seven sons, the sinister "Dr." al-Mutassim-Billah Gaddafi, Libya's "national security adviser," who contributed to the "war on terror" by undertaking dirty missions for the U.S. government. "I am very pleased to welcome Minister Qadhafi here to the State Department. We deeply value the relationship between the United States and Libya. We have many opportunities to deepen and broaden our cooperation. And I'm very much looking forward to building on this relationship." (U.S. Department of State.) And, of course, several European allies of Washington cozied up to Gaddafi even more than the U.S. itself did, most prominent among them the unbearable racist-sexist buffoon ruling Italy.

*"Ten days ago, having tried to end the violence without using force, the international community offered Gaddafi a final chance to stop his campaign of killing, or face the consequences. **Rather than stand down, his forces continued their advance, bearing down on the city of Benghazi, home to nearly 700,000 men, women and***

children who sought their freedom from fear.

"At this point, the United States and the world faced a choice. Gaddafi declared that he would show "no mercy" to his own people. He compared them to rats, and threatened to go door to door to inflict punishment. In the past, we had seen him hang civilians in the streets, and kill over a thousand people in a single day. Now, we saw regime forces on the outskirts of the city. **We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi â€" a city nearly the size of Charlotte â€" could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.**

"It was not in our national interest to let that happen. ...

"America has an important strategic interest in preventing Gaddafi from overrunning those who oppose him. A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders..."

This is strictly true. In a comment sent from Benghazi for *The New Yorker* and entitled "[Who are the rebels?](#)," Jon Lee Anderson recently confirmed what many other observers on the ground had asserted, corroborating the fears expressed by the uprising in Benghazi and the high urgency of their request for air cover: "When the first columns of [Gaddafi's] soldiers reached the city's edge, many thousands of Benghaziansâ€"including some city-council membersâ€"fled eastward. Of those who stayed to fight, more than thirty died, and the effort was saved only by the arrival of French warplanes." As a Libyan truck driver in Ajdabiya told the Financial Times' reporter: "We know the weapons of the revolution are nothing compared with Gaddafi... If it were not for the planes, he would have done zanga zanga" â€" the Arabic for "alley by alley," referring to Gaddafi's now famous speech in which he threatened to crush the rebellion in frightening terms.

In his [editorial](#) in the March 28 issue of the Arabic-language London-based al-Quds al-Arabi, Abdul-Bari Atwan, who knows Libya very well, explained the reason for Gaddafi's military superiority over the uprising: "The armament of the rebels, especially those who are concentrated in the Eastern province, is extremely weak compared with that of the forces loyal to the Libyan leader ... Colonel Gaddafi had dissolved the Libyan army some twenty years ago, after the coup attempt led by Omar al-Mihayshi, and replaced it with armed militias led by his sons or members of his tribe in order to guarantee their complete allegiance."

It was a matter of very few days at most before Gaddafi's forces would have taken Benghazi and perpetrated a huge massacre "that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world," thus putting Western governments in the difficult political situation of having failed to respond to a request for protection from a population in danger, with a mass-scale slaughter resulting from their inaction. The key point here was neither "values" nor "conscience" as such, but the fact that the "stained conscience" of the Western powers, had they remained inactive, would have compelled them to embargo Libya at a time when the oil market was so stressed that this would have driven oil prices to a still higher level than their already high level prior to the Libyan crisis, with calamitous consequences for the global economy. This is why, as Obama put it: "It was not in our [\[1\]](#) to let that happen."

"I authorized military action to stop the killing and enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1973. We struck regime forces approaching Benghazi to save that city and the people within it. We hit Gaddafi's troops in neighboring Ajdabiya, allowing the opposition to drive them out. We hit his air defenses, which paved the way for a No Fly Zone. We targeted tanks and military assets that had been choking off towns and cities and we cut off much of their source of supply. And tonight, I can report that we have stopped Gaddafi's deadly advance."

This is a basically accurate description of what happened, along with the inevitable killing of civilians by coalition

bombings, which, to be fair, has been relatively limited until now in the intervention in Libya compared to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, the spectacle of Western planes and missiles pounding Gaddafi's positions in Libya aroused legitimate emotion, and could not but evoke the spectacle of purely imperialist aggressions like the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But there was no way of stopping Gaddafi from committing his foretold massacre without enforcing a no-fly zone and halting the movement of his armored vehicles toward the populated zones held by the uprising. We could not support Western strikes due to our total lack of confidence in the heavy-handed approach of the Pentagon and its allies, and our certainty from past experiences that they would overstep the UN mandate of protecting the civilians. But neither could we oppose the no-fly zone and initial bombing of Gaddafi's armor that were insistently requested by the uprising for its rescue from Gaddafi's murderous vengeance.

"A massacre would have [put] enormous strains on the peaceful â€" yet fragile â€" transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. The democratic impulses that are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of dictatorship, as repressive leaders concluded that violence is the best strategy to cling to power."

For once, Obama is right against some writers on the left who claimed that the Western intervention in Libya was designed to halt â€" and would halt â€" the wave of democratic uprisings sweeping North Africa and the Middle East. On the contrary, had Gaddafi been able to crush the Libyan uprising in a bloodbath, this would have dramatically affected the situation, boosted the regional counter-revolution and deterred the protest movement from carrying on its fight in most countries. The fact that the massacre was averted and the uprising resumed its offensive in Libya further emboldened the regional revolutionary process. Since then not only did the movement gather momentum where it existed, in countries like Morocco and Yemen, but it spread and amplified in Syria, the only major country in the region where protest had been very weak hitherto.

*"Moreover, we have accomplished these objectives consistent with the pledge that I made to the American people at the outset of our military operations. I said that America's role would be limited; that **we would not put ground troops into Libya**; that we would focus our unique capabilities on the front end of the operation, and that we would transfer responsibility to our allies and partners. Tonight, we are fulfilling that pledge.*

"Our most effective alliance, NATO, has taken command of the enforcement of the arms embargo and No Fly Zone. Last night, NATO decided to take on the additional responsibility of protecting Libyan civilians. ...

"Of course, there is no question that Libya â€" and the world â€" will be better off with Gaddafi out of power. I, along with many other world leaders, have embraced that goal, and will actively pursue it through non-military means. But **broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake.**

"The task that I assigned our forces â€" to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger, and to establish a No Fly Zone â€" carries with it a UN mandate and international support. It is also what the Libyan opposition asked us to do. If we tried to overthrow Gaddafi by force, our coalition would splinter. We would likely have to put U.S. troops on the ground, or risk killing many civilians from the air. ...

"We have intervened to stop a massacre, and we will work with our allies and partners as they're in the lead to maintain the safety of civilians. **We will deny the regime arms**, cut off its supply of cash, assist the opposition, and work with other nations to hasten the day when Gaddafi leaves power."

Here we come to the key point with regard to UNSC resolution 1973, which invoked the responsibility to protect. Upon the very explicit request of the uprising, it excluded "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory," and this safeguard against imperialist control of Libya is crucial indeed. Those who believe that the U.S. could impose a "Karzai" on Libya by means of air power alone still have to show us how this could happen.

Whoever is familiar with the Afghan situation should know that, had the U.S. troops not been in control of Kabul, Hamid Karzai, who had absolutely negligible influence in the country, would never have been able to play "Mr. President" there. And whereas U.S. Afghan allies in the Northern Alliance had no mass base outside their ethnic regions, the Libyan opposition is clearly mass based in the country's key regions, making it much harder for outsiders to control the political outcome without a military presence on the ground. The qualms in Western political and military ruling circles as well as reports in mainstream Western media about the Libyan uprising are very telling in that regard (for example, see this recent report in [The Independent-
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/rebels-concede-tripoli-may-be-out-of%20reach-after-100mile-retreat-2256771.html>]).

Pointing to a few individuals of various and contradictory political identities who are playing or trying to play some role in the Libyan uprising does not say what influence they really command, and cannot be convincing as an indication of the shape of a post-Gaddafi Libya, all the less so given that the [National Transition Council](#) put forward a clear [programme](#) of democratic change calling for free and fair elections. The smear campaign against the Libyan uprising is equivalent to that of those who tried to discredit the Egyptian uprising either by pointing to the Muslim Brotherhood's role or by describing Mohamed ElBaradei as a stooge of imperialism and the April 6th Youth movement as a US-trained operation. And whatever statements this or that member of the Council might give to Western media in order to please the governments that are helping the uprising is secondary compared to the fact that the downfall of Gaddafi will make it possible for a left to emerge in Libya for the first time in more than four decades, and will allow international progressive movements to exert effective pressure on the Libyan state to discard the shameful agreement that Gaddafi concluded with his buddy Silvio Berlusconi in 2008 in order to facilitate Italy's unlawful turning back of African boat people.

The point now is what comes next. The massacre has been averted, Gaddafi's air power crippled beyond repair, his forces very much weakened although they still have a clear edge over the insurgents. The UN mandate has been fulfilled to all means and purposes in Obama's own acknowledgement, and yet NATO is taking over with a plan for a three-month operation over Libya. Any further bombing indisputably oversteps the UN mandate by turning NATO into a full participant in the ongoing civil war in Libya, albeit only from the air and sea. The pretext that this is part of the "all necessary measures" in order to "protect civilians" authorized by the unacceptably vague UNSC resolution is sustained by the military superiority of Gaddafi loyalists over the uprising.

However, the way to terminate this superiority and enable the uprising to win, in conformity with the Libyan people's right to self-determination, is for the hypocritical Western governments – who have sold a lot of weapons to Gaddafi since the arms embargo on Libya was lifted in October 2004 and Gaddafi turned into a model – to deliver arms to the insurgency. (The [European Union](#) granted licenses for \$834.5 million of arms exports to Gaddafi through the end of 2009, without counting the expanding sales in 2010; the [U.S. government](#) under the Bush administration approved arms sales to Libya for \$46 million in 2008; the Obama administration reduced this figure to \$17 million in 2009 while considering an armored car deal that would have increased it substantially.) Mahmoud Shammam, a spokesman for the Libyan opposition, told reporters during the international meeting on Libya convened in London on March 29 that, properly equipped, rebels "would finish Gaddafi in a few days." Other members of the Libyan opposition made similar statements. And yet, under the pretext that UNSC resolution 1973 reiterated the imposition of an arms embargo on the Libyan territory, Western governments are refraining from delivering weapons to the uprising, while the U.S. administration is indecisive to the point that Obama carefully avoided the issue in his speech, only speaking of denying arms to the Libyan regime. When faced with media questions about it later on, he replied: "[I'm not ruling it out, but I'm also not ruling it in.](#)" This should definitely be denounced.

In sum, it was wrong for any forces on the left to oppose the idea of a no-fly zone and the initial pounding of Gaddafi's armor in the absence of any alternative to avoid the foretold large-scale massacre in Libya. Opposing the no-fly zone while offering non-plausible alternatives, as many groups of the sane and true left did with the best of intentions, was unconvincing. It put the left in a weak position in the eyes of public opinion. Opposing the no-fly zone

while showing no concern about the civilians, as some fringe groups did, was immoral – not to mention the attitude of those reconstructed or unreconstructed Stalinists who are upholding Gaddafi as a progressive anti-imperialist and dismissing the uprising as a US-led or al-Qaeda-led conspiracy (while resorting to Stalinist-style slanders in discussing the position of those on the left who sympathized with the Libyan uprising's request for protection).

The no-fly zone request by the uprising should not have been opposed. Instead, we should have expressed our strong reservations on UNSC resolution 1973, and warned of any attempt to seize it as a pretext in order to further imperialist agendas. As I [said](#) the day after resolution 1973 was adopted, "without coming out against the no-fly zone, we must express defiance and advocate full vigilance in monitoring the actions of those states carrying it out, to make sure that they don't go beyond protecting civilians as mandated by the UNSC resolution." Our usual presumption against military interventions of imperialist states was overruled in the emergency circumstances of massacre impending, but these emergency circumstances are no longer there at present, and protecting the uprising can now be achieved in a much better way by supplying it with weapons.

Now that the no-fly zone has been implemented in NATO's typical heavy-handed manner and that Gaddafi forces' ability to threaten civilian concentrations with a large-scale massacre has been severely weakened, we should concentrate our campaign on two main inseparable demands addressed to the NATO-led coalition:

Stop the bombing! Deliver arms to the insurgents!

Coupling the two demands is our way to show concretely that we care for the Libyan people's uprising against its tyrant much more than those who deny them arms while wanting to impose their guardianship over their movement.

[1] national interest