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

The Libyan insurrection between Gaddafi's hammer, NATO's anvil and the Left's confusion: results and prospects

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It has been over a month since the NATO-led coalition started its military intervention in Libya, after the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted on March 17 its resolution 1973 authorizing the implementation of a no-fly zone over the country as well as "all necessary measures" in order "to protect civilians and civilian populated areas."

This resolution and the subsequent military intervention had been urgently requested by sources related to the Libyan insurrection that started gathering momentum in mid-February, inspired by the success of the Egyptian uprising in toppling Hosni Mubarak. In addition to the huge mass of non-political people who were very understandably fed up after more than 40 years of rule by an increasingly psychopathic dictator, the insurrection gathered the same mix of political forces that are active in most other uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East: i.e. liberal democrats, various types of Islamic currents from moderate to extremist, former members of the regime (in Tunisia, the army itself took the side of the protesters), and left-oriented groups and persons – probably in Libya as well. [The last time there was any indication about an organized left in Libya, to my knowledge, was in the early 1970s when news came out about the repression of a Trotskyist group there.]

From the early days, the repression of the mass uprising by forces loyal to the Gaddafi ruling family was bloodier than anything experienced by the mass protests against other Arab despots that had been unfolding since the beginning of this year. The regime in Tripoli had two major advantages over the insurrection despite the defection of a few of its officials and military forces to join the insurgents. Gaddafi, his sons and cronies controlled the well-armed brigades and the air force, as well as the considerable money and gold wealth available in the Libyan state's coffers. To compensate for the initial impact of the uprising on their military capabilities, they resorted to intensive hiring of mercenaries from poor African countries (according to diverse sources, this recruitment was done with the help of an Israeli firm at \$200 per capita per day, of which one half only is paid to the soldier of fortune). They also used both force and money in trying to create an impression of mass support for the dictatorship (refugees from Tripoli in Tunisia, where I have recently been, confirm that they were offered money in order to demonstrate in the streets in support of Gaddafi).

On 22 February, two days after his son Saif had warned the protesters that Libya is no Tunisia or Egypt – meaning that the Gaddafi family would not relinquish power under political pressure – and threatened them with civil war, Muammar al-Gaddafi himself gave one of the most dreadful speeches in recent historical memory, a speech whose tone and vocabulary (in particular the description of his opponents as rodents and insects) were reminiscent of the 1930s (only a partial and approximate translation of the speech is available in English). The Libyan despot evoked as precedents that he intended to imitate, among others, the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen and the 2004 one in Fallujah. He also evoked the 2008-9 Israeli onslaught on Gaza, an analogy that he reiterated on March 7 in an interview he gave to a French satellite channel. And in a further speech on March 17, the day resolution 1973 was to be adopted by the Security Council, he compared his assault on Benghazi to that of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco's attack on Madrid, stating that he relied on the emergence of a "fifth column" from among the city's population to help him "liberate" it. The regime forces had then started concentrating on the outskirts of Benghazi in order to launch their offensive on the city, which began on March 19.

Faced with the overwhelming military superiority of Gaddafi's forces, the insurgents had been requesting international protection for several days, in particular a no-fly zone to prevent the use by Gaddafi of his air force. At its first meeting on March 5, the Interim Transitional National Council adopted a founding statement ending with the following:

"Finally, even though the balance of power is uneven between the defenceless protesters and the tyrant regime's

mercenaries and private battalions, we will rely on the will of our people for a free and dignified existence. Furthermore, we request from the international community to fulfil its obligations to protect the Libyan people from any further genocide and crimes against humanity without any direct military intervention on Libya soil."

This request was backed by the Arab League one week later, on March 12, with two states – Algeria and Syria – disapproving it out of 21 (Libya not being represented). [A comment in English on this meeting stated that only 11 members of the League were present and took part in the vote, confusing the fact of being represented by a foreign minister with being represented at all. All the states other than Libya were represented in the meeting either by their foreign minister or at a lower level (ambassadorial, or equivalent). Incidentally, it is interesting to note that pro-regime demonstrations in Syria and Libya chant a similar slogan: "God, Libya, Muammar and no one else" in one country, "God, Syria, Bashar and no one else" in the other.] For Arab regimes, including the most reactionary of all grouped in the Gulf Cooperation Council, this was a cheap way of pleasing an Arab public opinion worried about the fate of the Libyan uprising, while each one of them is engaged in quelling or pre-empting an uprising at home. For the Arab League Secretary, Amr Moussa, it was a further way of claiming to be on the side of the people after his opportunistic appearance among protesters on Cairo's Tahrir Square, in view of his candidacy for the post of president in post-Mubarak Egypt.

The request was then backed by key Western military powers, especially the three holding permanent seats on the UNSC. For Western powers, several considerations were involved: the potential nefarious oil-related economic consequences of a large-scale massacre in Libya that I have pointed to on several previous occasions, the fear that "a massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders" as expressed by Barack Obama in the speech he delivered on March 28, and, to be sure, the moral responsibility and ideological embarrassment of being accused of failing to come to the rescue of a population in danger that called for help, while having previously invaded countries from where no such request was made under the pretext of helping their population.

It was also for the same powers a (politically cheap, but financially rather expensive) way of trying to show that they stood side-by-side with the popular democratic aspirations in the Arab world, hoping this would lead people to forget their actual record: years of support for Arab autocracies, including Gaddafi's. Washington in particular wanted to obscure the fact that its backing of Mubarak and then his intelligence chief lasted until the very last moment; and Paris wanted to hide its politically disastrous offer of help to dictator Ben Ali in his initial attempts at quelling the uprising in Tunisia, before it reached impressive proportions. The intervention was moreover a way to divert attention from the double standard that the United States and its allies are continuing to display, especially in their very mildly critical – if not actually benevolent – attitude towards the repression of mass uprisings in U.S. dominions in the Gulf, such as Bahrain. For Nicolas Sarkozy, it was in addition to all that a way of securing a major stake in post-Gaddafi Libyan oil contracts at the expense of France's competitors. And for David Cameron, Silvio Berlusconi, and their peers, their stance was a response to the French attempt to muscle in on their already substantial interests in Libya.

Whatever the considerations, there was no option on 19 March – after the UNSC resolution's order of a ceasefire was de facto rejected by the Libyan regime – other than the alternative between, on the one hand, Gaddafi's troops occupying Benghazi at a terrible human cost and, on the other hand, the intervention by NATO powers in order to prevent this outcome at a certainly lesser human cost in the short run, with obvious uncertainty as to the future. There was no other realistic third and better scenario: an intervention by Arab states alone, as advocated by some people, would certainly not have been a better and less murderous option (all Arab states are Western-dependent and/or undemocratic to various degrees, including military-ruled Egypt), and the rest was only wishful thinking. Had Gaddafi crushed the uprising in a bloodbath, the counter-revolutionary effect on the whole region would have undoubtedly been terrible. It was necessary to stop him from doing that: a case in point where one has to tolerate a "lesser evil" against a greater one.

The key issue under such conditions was and is to avoid falling prey to illusions about what remains an "evil," albeit a less dangerous one for the moment (one reason for this being the proviso that the intervention does not turn into one on the ground). Such illusions are unfortunately developing among the insurgent population in Benghazi, as illustrated by the display of Western flags, especially French ones, and pro-Western billboards. Leon Trotsky put it once most aptly:

"As was said long ago, purely practical agreements, such as do not bind us in the least and do not oblige us to anything politically, can be concluded with the devil himself, if that is advantageous at a given moment. But it would be absurd in such a case to demand that the devil should generally become converted to Christianity, and that he use his horns.... for pious deeds. In presenting such conditions, we act in reality as the devil's advocates, and beg him to let us become his godfathers."

This was the sense of my own first contribution on this issue on March 19. I said that we cannot oppose the no-fly zone request made by the Libyan insurgents and its initial implementation. I never said that we should support it, and even less support the Western intervention, as I was misrepresented as stating by many people on the left "some comrades in good faith, others in the typical fashion of those who, if ever they held power, would send everyone who disagreed with them to the Gulag. At the same time, I denounced the hypocrisy of those powers that were about to intervene, and warned against any illusions about their intentions, advocating full vigilance in monitoring their actions and opposing any infringement beyond the official mandate of protecting the civilian population.[No person reading my statements without the distorting lenses pertaining to a deeply-entrenched tradition of sectarianism that, alas, is still pervasive in the radical left could fail to see the qualitative difference between my stance and that expressed on March 27 by my friend Juan Cole, with whom I have had a previous public disagreement over Iraq "not to mention much sillier conflation of my attitude with that of "liberal" supporters of imperialism.]

Six days later, in a second contribution on this issue dated March 25, in which I engaged in a debate with those who had criticized or attacked my position, I wrote that "we should definitely demand that bombings stop after Gaddafi's air means have been neutralized," adding that:

"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. ... 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."

Major anti-imperialist forces in the Arab world took a position similar to the one I expressed on March 19, putting the blame on Gaddafi, and warning of Western forces' designs without condemning the no-fly zone or calling to demonstrate against the Western intervention: from Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in his speech on March 19, to the Lebanese Communist Party, to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, to Annahj Addimocrati, the main organization of the radical left in Morocco " not to mention the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (and its sister organizations, including the Palestinian Hamas), which I would hesitate to classify as "anti-imperialist." Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists " who are affiliated with the international tendency of which the British Socialist Workers Party is the most prominent component " did not put forward anything more specific than a vague "No to foreign interference" beyond the critique of imperialist designs that is common to all. They blamed the UNSC for failing earlier to deliver weapons to the rebels. The only left organization in the Arab world that called for "the immediate cessation" of the military intervention is, to my knowledge, Tunisia's formerly pro-Albanian Workers Communist Party. They also called "all anti-imperialist forces in the Arab and Islamic region and the whole world to act and to call all the peoples of the world to walk in marches and demonstrations and wage all forms of struggle to stop this intervention."

A mere comparison between this latter call and the fact that nowhere in the world was there a mass protest against

the Western intervention in Libya, despite the fact that several groups and individuals of the Western left took stances rejecting the no-fly zone and calling for mobilization in order to halt the Western intervention, is eloquent. Of all major military actions by Western powers in recent years, the military intervention in Libya is the one that aroused the least mass protest. And all that some groups of the Western left managed to do with their knee-jerk opposition to the no-fly zone and the Western intervention was lose a precious opportunity to get themselves heard by the broad Arab masses. In all the popular mobilizations that have taken place since March 17 in the Arab region, expressions of support to the Libyan uprising have been widely on display, but hardly any call for the end of Western intervention.

Instead of acting out of conditioned political reflexes, the above-mentioned groups of the Western left, fighting in the belly of the beast, would have had much more impact in expressing their understanding of the position of the Libyan insurgents, putting the blame on Gaddafi for having confronted them with such a dilemma, while vigorously warning the Libyan people and other peoples of the Arab region against any illusions about the imperialist powers' designs, and demanding the delivery of weapons to the insurgents to enable them to defeat Gaddafi with their own force. Such a stance would have attracted much more sympathy for the left both among Arabs and internationally. [Lance Selfa concludes his comradely discussion of my position, posted on March 29 on Socialistworker.org, by asserting that "however unpopular a position it appears to be today, the left is right to oppose the UN no-fly zone over Libya and the Western military intervention." It is indeed an unpopular position, but the problem is that it was not right, and the part of the left he is referring to needed not take an unpopular position in this case. I am all for taking just positions even when they are unpopular in every case where this is warranted, but this was definitely not one.]

In my latest contribution on March 31, I noted the fact that the impending massacre in Benghazi has been averted, Gaddafi's air power crippled beyond repair and his forces very much weakened, although they still have a clear edge over the insurgents. I therefore denounced NATO's plan to carry on its direct intervention for three months seizing as a pretext the UNSC resolution and the military superiority of Gaddafi's forces, and emphasized that

"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....

"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."

In an op-ed published online by the French daily Le Monde on April 12, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the chairman of the Interim (or Transitional) National Council that leads the Libyan uprising, acknowledged what independent observers on the ground had already confirmed, namely that Libya would have fallen under Gaddafi's iron heel "had it not been rescued by the French planes that saved Benghazi from the bloodbath that the dictator was promising it, and had the intervention of the international community led by Mr Sarkozy and his allies not taken place." He added however:

"We do not request that anyone wages the war in our stead. We do not ask foreign soldiers to come and stop the enemy. We are not expecting Libya's friends to liberate our country for our sake. We ask to be given time and the means to constitute a force that will hold in respect the dictator's mercenaries and praetorian guard and then liberate our cities. The international community, unless it changes its stance, must continue to help us, not only with planes but also in the form of equipment and armament. Give us the means to liberate ourselves and we will astonish the

world: Gaddafi is only strong out of the youth and initial weakness of our struggle; he is a paper tiger; wait and you'll see."

Gaddafi's forces adopted new fighting tactics, stationing in urbanized areas near civilians and using lighter vehicles in their movement. They maintain nevertheless a clear advantage over the insurgents due to their superiority in weapons that was well described and assessed recently by C. J. Chivers in the New York Times (April 20). Under such conditions, they could only be defeated with long-distance strikes (drones included) at a very high cost in human lives and extensive material destruction of Libya, if they could be defeated in this way at all. This is a further reason why foreign military strikes should be replaced by arms delivery to the insurgents so that they liberate their own country, as they have not ceased asserting that they want and are able to achieve.

The reasons that Chivers put forward to explain the strong reluctance of most Western powers, especially the U.S. government, to deliver to the insurgents the means that would enable them to win are of the same hypocritical vein as the claim that these powers' intervention was primarily motivated by humanitarian considerations. The said reasons are 1) that the "lawless" insurgents could infringe the international rules of war and even commit war crimes, and 2) that weapons delivered to them might end up on the "black market" and in the hands of terrorists. Chivers concludes his piece by saying: "To watch Libyan rebels head to battle is to watch young men calling for freedom step toward a bloody mismatch, and often their deaths. To arm them, though, is to assume other risks, some of which could last for years." It didn't occur to Chivers, or he didn't bother to mention, that 1) the same Western powers that are intervening militarily in Libya are regular violators of the rules of war and perpetrators of war crimes on a scale that dwarfs not only the potential crimes of the Libyan insurgents but even those of the Libyan dictatorship itself, and 2) these same powers did not have qualms when it came to selling weapons to all sort of bloody tyrants, many of them specialists in state or state-sponsored terrorism, including of course Gaddafi.

In a recent piece (apparently wrongly dated March 11) posted on SIPRI's website, Pieter Wezeman explained very well how "in the current military air strikes against Libyan forces, nations that once supported Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime are now "based on sanction by the United Nations" attacking the forces they were marketing and delivering arms to only weeks before." Hypocrisy, however, cannot hide the basic reason of the Western powers' reluctance to arm the insurgents: they have no confidence in the Interim National Council, no confidence in its capacity to control the mass uprising, and no confidence in the allegiance to their interest of a future democratically-elected Libyan government. The very fact that many figures of the uprising on the ground in Libya have expressed harsh criticisms towards NATO instead of displaying the servile gratitude that the Alliance expected from them is an important signal that Western capitals have not failed to perceive.

Ultimately, Western powers are increasingly sharing Israel's kind of worries about Syria, some of them probably regretting that they did not let Gaddafi quell the uprising and continue his role as a precious ally in their "war on terror" and their terrorist war on immigrants. In a cogent article in Le Monde dated April 14, Jean-François Bayart denounced the collusion between the European states, led by Italy, and Gaddafi's regime in the dirty, criminal repression of immigration from African shores to European territory (including Italian islands in the Mediterranean). He pointed to the fact that NATO is not attacking Gaddafi's fleet for fear of destroying what he aptly called "the anti-migratory tool of trade"!

The only way in which NATO powers such as France and Britain are envisaging a (limited) delivery of weapons to the Libyan insurgents is under tight control from "advisers" they send on the spot "in order to scout around for a future intervention of troops on the ground (the claim that these advisers are needed is just a pretext that is not even corroborated by the insurgents themselves). These NATO powers are preparing the conditions for such an invasion by the very fact that they refuse to deliver to the insurgents the arms and equipment they need to defeat Gaddafi's forces, thus enabling the latter to progress to a point where the Libyan insurgents themselves may feel compelled to request the ground intervention that they have rightly and resolutely rejected until now. A first victory of this Machiavellian manoeuvre is the fact that the insurgents in Misrata have asked for an intervention on the ground after

despairing of NATO's ability to stop from the air and sea the advance of Gaddafi's forces.

The worldwide antiwar and anti-imperialist movement should mobilize on behalf of the Libyan uprising as well as all other uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, and know how to most effectively denounce the design of the imperialist powers by showing who are the true supporters of popular struggles. [I had ended my March 25 piece by asserting: "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."

Some thought they had found in this quote a good occasion to score a point against me. One of them asked with emphatic irony why such a demand for a no-fly zone was not made with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and attack on Gaza in 2008-9? Well, the fact is that the Arab League called two weeks ago, on April 10, for the first time ever for a meeting of the UNSC to consider imposing a no-fly zone on Israeli military aircraft over Gaza, when things looked as if Israel was going to launch a new major bombing campaign against the strip. The League's move was hailed by both the Palestinian authority and the Hamas government in Gaza, and by pro-Palestinian groups worldwide, while it drew irritated and worried reactions from Israeli and pro-Israeli sources.]

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