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Libya

What's happening in Libya?

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Gilbert Achcar was interviewed by Stephen R. Shalom. This interview was originally published on ZNet on Saturday March 19th.

Who is the Libyan opposition? Some have noted the presence of the old monarchist flag in rebel ranks.

This flag is not used as a symbol of the monarchy, but as the flag that the Libyan state adopted after it won independence from Italy. It is used by the uprising in order to reject the Green Flag imposed by Gaddafi along with his Green Book, when he was aping Mao Zedong and his Little Red Book. In no way does the tricolor flag indicate nostalgia for the monarchy. In the most common interpretation, it symbolizes the three historic regions of Libya, and the crescent and star are the same symbols you see on the flags of the Algerian, Tunisian and Turkish republics, not symbols of monarchism.

So who is the opposition? The composition of the opposition is "as in all the other revolts shaking the region" very heterogeneous. What unites all the disparate forces is a rejection of the dictatorship and a longing for democracy and human rights. Beyond that, there are many different perspectives. In Libya, more particularly, there is a mixture of human rights activists, democracy advocates, intellectuals, tribal elements, and Islamic forces "a very broad collection. The most prominent political force in the Libyan uprising is the "Youth of the 17th of February Revolution," which has a democratic platform, calling for the rule of law, political freedoms, and free elections. The Libyan movement also includes sections of the government and the armed forces that have broken away and joined the opposition" which you didn't have in Tunisia or Egypt.

So the Libyan opposition represents a mixture of forces, and the bottom line is that there is no reason for any different attitude toward them than to any other of the mass uprisings in the region.

Is Gaddafi " or was Gaddafi " a progressive figure?

When Gaddafi came to power in 1969 he was a late manifestation of the wave of Arab nationalism that followed World War II and the 1948 Nakba. He tried to imitate Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who he regarded as his model and inspiration. So he replaced the monarchy with a republic, championed Arab unity, forced the withdrawal of the U.S.'s Wheelus Airbase from Libyan territory, and initiated a program of social change.

Then the regime moved in its own way, along the path of radicalization, inspired by an Islamized Maoism. There were sweeping nationalizations in the late 1970s " almost everything was nationalized. Gaddafi claimed to have instituted direct democracy " and formally changed the name of the country from Republic to State of the Masses (Jamahiriya). He pretended that he had turned the country into the fulfillment of socialist utopia with direct democracy, but few were fooled. The "revolutionary committees" were actually acting as a ruling apparatus along with the security services in controlling the country. At the same time, Gaddafi also played an especially reactionary role in reinvigorating tribalism as a tool for his own power. His foreign policy became increasingly foolhardy, and most Arabs came to consider him crazy.

With the Soviet Union in crisis, Gaddafi shifted away from his socialist pretensions and re-opened his economy to Western business. He asserted that his economic liberalization would be accompanied by a political one, aping Gorbachev's perestroika after having aped Mao Zedong's "cultural revolution," but the political claim was an empty one. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 under the pretext of searching for "weapons of mass destruction,"

Gaddafi, worried that he might be next, implemented a sudden and surprising turnabout in foreign policy, earning himself a spectacular upgrade from the status of "rogue state" to that of close collaborator of Western states. A collaborator in particular of the United States, which he helped in its so-called war on terror, and Italy, for which he did the dirty job of turning back would-be immigrants trying to get from Africa to Europe.

Throughout these metamorphoses, Gaddafi's regime was always a dictatorship. Whatever early progressive measures Gaddafi may have enacted, there was nothing left of progressivism or anti-imperialism in his regime in the last phase. Its dictatorial character showed itself in the way he reacted to the protests: immediately deciding to quell them by force. There was no attempt to offer any kind of democratic outlet for the population. He warned the protesters in a now famous tragic-comic speech: "We will come inch by inch, home by home, alley by alley ... We will find you in your closets. We will have no mercy and no pity." Not a surprise, knowing that Gaddafi was the only Arab ruler who publicly blamed the Tunisian people for having toppled their own dictator Ben Ali, whom he described as the best ruler the Tunisians would find.

Gaddafi resorted to threats and violent repression, claiming that the protesters had been turned into drug addicts by Al Qaeda, who poured hallucinogens in their coffees. Blaming Al Qaeda for the uprising was his way of trying to get the support of the West. Had there been any offer of help from Washington or Rome, you can be sure that Gaddafi would have gladly welcomed it. He actually expressed his bitter disappointment at the attitude of his buddy Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, with whom he enjoyed partying, and complained that his other European "friends" also betrayed him. In the last few years, Gaddafi had indeed become a friend of several Western rulers and other establishment figures who, for a fistful of dollars, have been willing to ridicule themselves exchanging hugs with him. Anthony Giddens himself, the distinguished theoretician of Tony Blair's Third Way, followed in his disciple's steps by paying a visit to Gaddafi in 2007 and writing in the Guardian how Libya was on the path of reform and on its way to becoming the Norway of the Middle East.

What is your assessment of UN Security Council resolution 1973 adopted on March 17?

The resolution itself is phrased in a way that takes into consideration "and" and appears to respond to "the request by the uprising for a no-fly zone. The opposition has indeed explicitly called for a no-fly zone, on the condition that no foreign troops be deployed on Libyan territory. Gaddafi has the bulk of the elite armed forces, with aircraft and tanks, and the no-fly zone would indeed neutralize his main military advantage. This request of the uprising is reflected in the text of the resolution, which authorizes UN member states "to take all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." The resolution establishes "a ban on all flights in the airspace of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in order to help protect civilians."

Now there are not enough safeguards in the wording of the resolution to bar its use for imperialist purposes. Although the purpose of any action is supposed to be the protection of civilians, and not "regime change," the determination of whether an action meets this purpose or not is left up to the intervening powers and not to the uprising, or even the Security Council. The resolution is amazingly confused. But given the urgency of preventing the massacre that would have inevitably resulted from an assault on Benghazi by Gaddafi's forces, and the absence of any alternative means of achieving the protection goal, no one can reasonably oppose it. One can understand the abstentions; some of the five states who abstained in the UNSC vote wanted to express their defiance and/or unhappiness with the lack of adequate oversight, but without taking the responsibility for an impending massacre.

The Western response, of course, smacks of oil. The West fears a long drawn out conflict. If there is a major massacre, they would have to impose an embargo on Libyan oil, thus keeping oil prices at a high level at a time when, given the current state of the global economy, this would have major adverse consequences. Some countries, including the United States, acted reluctantly. Only France emerged as very much in favor of strong action, which

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might well be connected to the fact that France – unlike Germany (which abstained in the UNSC vote), Britain, and, above all, Italy – does not have a major stake in Libyan oil, and certainly hopes to get a greater share post-Gaddafi.

We all know about the Western powers' pretexts and double standards. For example, their alleged concern about harm to civilians bombarded from the air did not seem to apply in Gaza in 2008-09, when hundreds of noncombatants were being killed by Israeli warplanes in furtherance of an illegal occupation. Or the fact that the US allows its client regime in Bahrain, where it has a major naval base, to violently repress the local uprising, with the help of other regional vassals of Washington.

The fact remains, nevertheless, that if Gaddafi were permitted to continue his military offensive and take Benghazi, there would be a major massacre. Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it. The attack by Gaddafi's forces was hours or at most days away. You can't in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians. In the same way, even though we know well the nature and double standards of cops in the bourgeois state, you can't in the name of anti-capitalist principles blame anybody for calling them when someone is on the point of being raped and there is no alternative way of stopping the rapists.

This said, 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. In watching on TV the crowds in Benghazi cheering the passage of the resolution, I saw a big billboard in their middle that said in Arabic "No to foreign intervention." People there make a distinction between "foreign intervention" by which they mean troops on the ground, and a protective no-fly zone. They oppose foreign troops. They are aware of the dangers and wisely don't trust Western powers.

So, to sum up, I believe that from an anti-imperialist perspective one cannot and should not oppose the no-fly zone, given that there is no plausible alternative for protecting the endangered population. The Egyptians are reported to be providing weapons to the Libyan opposition – and that's fine – but on its own it couldn't have made a difference that would have saved Benghazi in time. But again, one must maintain a very critical attitude toward what the Western powers might do.

What's going to happen now?

It's difficult to tell what will happen now. The UN Security Council resolution did not call for regime change; it's about protecting civilians. The future of the Gaddafi regime is uncertain. The key question is whether we will see the resumption of the uprising in western Libya, including Tripoli, leading to a disintegration of the regime's armed forces. If that occurs, then Gaddafi may be ousted soon. But if the regime manages to remain firmly in control in the west, then there will be a de facto division of the country – even though the resolution affirms the territorial integrity and national unity of Libya. This may be what the regime has chosen, as it has just announced its compliance with the UN resolution and proclaimed a ceasefire. What we might then have is a prolonged stalemate, with Gaddafi controlling the west and the opposition the east. It will obviously take time before the opposition can incorporate the weapons it is receiving from and through Egypt to the point of becoming able to inflict military defeat on Gaddafi's forces. Given the nature of the Libyan territory, this can only be a regular war rather than a popular one, a war of movement over vast stretches of territory. That's why the outcome is hard to predict. The bottom line here again is that we should support the victory of the Libyan democratic uprising. Its defeat at the hands of Gaddafi would be a severe backlash negatively affecting the revolutionary wave that is currently shaking the Middle East and North Africa.