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Libya

Popular rebellion & imperialist designs

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

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Gilbert Achcar spoke to Tom Mills of New Left Project, a British-based website, about the rebellion in Libya and the motives behind NATO's intervention on 25 August 2011.

At the onset of NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya, the main justification for it was that Gaddafi's forces would massacre the resistance and civilians living in the places taken by the resistance, especially Benghazi. What has been learned since then about how likely such a scenario was?

In situations of urgency, there is no better judge than the people directly concerned, and there was unanimity on that score. Did you ever hear of any significant group in Benghazi opposed to the request of a No-Fly zone made to the UN and advocating another way to prevent Gaddafi's troops from taking the city? We all saw the immense popular relief that was expressed in the massive outburst of joy in Benghazi when the UN resolution was passed. Journalists and reporters covering the events on the ground agreed likewise on the fact that Gaddafi's forces would have had no difficulty seizing the city. The remnants of the tanks and vehicles that were concentrated on Benghazi's outskirts and were destroyed by the French air force are still there for everyone to see, I have been told. On top of that, we have seen how long Gaddafi's well-armed, well-trained and well-paid forces were able to carry on offensive after offensive, despite several months of NATO strikes, and how difficult and costly in human lives it has been for the rebellion, first to secure Misrata, which is much smaller than Benghazi, and then to break the deadlock on the Western front before finally entering Tripoli. Anyone who from far away disputes the fact that Benghazi would have been crushed is just lacking decency in my view. Telling a besieged people from the safety of a Western city that they are cowards – because that's what disputing their claim that they were facing a massacre amounts to – is just indecent.

That's about the balance of forces. What about the likelihood that if Benghazi had fallen there would have been a massacre? Isn't that still a matter of speculation?

No, not at all. Let me first remind you that the repression that Gaddafi unleashed in February, from the very beginning of the Libyan uprising, was much greater than anything else we have seen since then. Take even the case of Syria: today, several months after the protest movement started in March, it is estimated that the number of people killed in Syria has reached 2,200. The range of estimates of the number of people who were killed in Libya in the first month alone, before the Western intervention, starts at more than that figure and reaches 10,000. The use by Gaddafi of all sorts of weapons, including his air force, was much more extensive and intensive than anything we have seen until now in other Arab countries.

Furthermore, Gaddafi and his son, Saif al-Islam, did not hide their intentions in the least. They said from the start that they were going to be merciless and that they will crush the rebellion like rats and cockroaches and other nice ways of describing masses of protesters from among their own people. We know what kind of regimes have used such terms about their enemies in the 20th century, and what mass slaughters and genocides they committed. In mid-March, there had already been massive killings in several Libyan cities. Given that Benghazi had been the heart of the rebellion from the start and became a liberated city, there is hardly any doubt that had Gaddafi forces been able to seize the city a huge massacre would have ensued.

I always give the example of the Syrian regime because it shares some features with the one in Libya, even though it is to some degree less bloody and murderous. In 1982 when Hafez al-Assad crushed the city of Hama, which was a stronghold for the Muslim Brotherhood in rebellion against him, the estimates of the number of people killed ranged from 10,000 to 40,000, with the most commonly quoted figure being 25,000 – this in a city which in 1982 had only one third of the population of Benghazi today. So we know what we are dealing with here and we can take other

examples from history. When Adolphe Thiers's forces took back Paris at the time of the Commune in 1871, with much less lethal weaponry they killed and executed 25,000 persons. This is the kind of massacre that Benghazi was facing, and that is why I said under such circumstances – when the city's population and the rebellion requested, even implored the UN to provide them with air cover, and in the absence of any alternative – that it was neither acceptable nor decent from the comfort of London or New York to say, 'No to the no-fly zone'. Those on the left who did so were in my view reacting out of knee-jerk anti-imperialism, showing little care for the people concerned on the ground. That's not my understanding of what it means to be on the left.

That said, I never held that we on the left, me included, had to support NATO's intervention in Libya, or even support the UN resolution. I criticised that resolution, and denounced from day one the intervention's real motive and the fact that it smacks of oil. But I said at the same time that we couldn't oppose it from the start because of the reasons I've just explained. Once the danger threatening Benghazi was over – and that was a matter of a few days, one week or ten days, by which time Gaddafi's air force was crushed beyond repair – it became possible and even necessary to oppose the continuation of the bombing, which was clearly going beyond its initial and official mission of protection. Here again, in line with my conception of what the left is – not primarily anti-imperialism of the knee-jerk kind, but being most of all concerned with people's liberation from oppression – I called for the left to campaign against the continuation of the bombing, provided that it campaigns at the same time for the delivery of weapons to the rebels. The rebels themselves requested arms very early on, and kept on requesting and increasingly so over the weeks and months.

I remained consistent in my position, which was that we should not campaign against the intervention as long as there really was a need to prevent a massacre, but we must monitor the situation closely nonetheless, and denounce anything that goes beyond that initial purpose. I said that from day one in my [first interview](#) published on ZNet on 19 March, the one which provoked a deluge of discussion. And indeed, once that initial purpose was fulfilled, I advocated a campaign on two inseparable demands: 'Stop the bombing! Deliver arms to the insurgents!'

So moving on to NATO itself, given its humanitarian justification for the mission, it is important to know what the humanitarian impacts of NATO's actions have been. How much is known about the deaths, civilian and otherwise, caused by NATO, as well as other impacts NATO has had on the well-being of Libyans?

The humanitarian pretext is, of course, purely hypocritical. No one should believe for one second that NATO is motivated by humanitarian feelings. We've heard the humanitarian discourse so many times over the last two decades and we know exactly what it is about. Whether in Iraq or Kosovo or even Afghanistan, it has been repeatedly used as a pretext and it is completely worn out. I said from the very start that the Western powers' intervention smacks of oil.

There was an indirect humanitarian concern however, as I tried to explain, in that had the massacre taken place Western governments would have been obliged to do what they are doing now for Syria. If you are following the news, they have now decided to enforce oil sanctions against Syria. Had a massacre occurred in Benghazi they would have had to do the same, all the more that the scale of the massacre would have been much larger than what has occurred so far in Syria. This would have meant imposing an oil embargo on Libya, a measure which under the conditions of the oil market and the world economy would have been harmful for them. So instead of having to react after a massacre and to bear the blame for having let it happen, they preferred to intervene. That decision was therefore closely related to the fact that Libya is a major oil-producing country and that embargoing it would have a real implication on the world economy (unlike in the case of Syria).

Now even though they didn't go there out of humanitarian feelings, since they invoked this humanitarian pretension they had to take care – as much as they could, striking from thousands of feet – to minimise casualties. In the post-Vietnam wars, since Iraq 1991, we have seen that they have been trying to minimise civilian casualties using

their new technologies. This is not because imperialists have suddenly turned into humanitarians but because they know that Western populations do have humanitarian feelings and cannot morally accept seeing their governments killing civilians on a massive scale. That was a key motivation for the huge anti-war movement at the time of Vietnam. So they assimilated the lessons of the Vietnam War. Anyone familiar with the evolution of Western military doctrines knows that. So, to be sure, they tried to minimise civilian casualties in Libya. The number of air sorties, and even more so the number of air strikes, has been anyhow of a lower intensity compared to the air campaigns in the Iraq, Afghanistan or Kosovo wars. They even tried harder than average to minimise civilian casualties because they were running this campaign under UN cover and purportedly for the protection of civilians. This is why the number of civilian casualties resulting from NATO's operation, through what the military cynically call 'collateral damage', has been kept relatively low.

One must compare the civilian casualties that resulted from NATO strikes with the potential civilian casualties that they prevented through limiting the firepower of Gaddafi's forces towards rebel-held populated areas. There is no question in my mind that, even after all these months of NATO bombing, civilian casualties resulting from it remain much less than what they would have been had Benghazi been occupied by Gaddafi's troops and the insurrection subdued in the whole country. That said, the fact that NATO decided to continue its bombing over a long period, the fact that they tried to hijack the Libyan insurrection and control it by controlling the pace of events while refusing to give the Libyans the means to counter effectively by themselves Gaddafi's forces' superior firepower, the fact that NATO imposed itself as a full participant in the war since its initial phase, all this of course increased the number of civilians killed by NATO bombing. Now if the number of civilians killed by NATO were the only consideration for opposing its continued intervention, anyone could tell me since I am advocating the delivery of weapons to the insurgents as an alternative, that had the civil war carried on longer and with heavier weapons in the insurgents' hands, it might have led to more civilians killed. That's quite possible indeed, but the issue here is clearly a matter of speculation, not certainty. What is most important is to be aware of NATO's designs to impose its will on the Libyan people through its intervention, and to uphold the people's right to self-determination. It is the Libyans themselves who have consistently and insistently requested weapons from the beginning in order to fight their own war.

You suggested that the original motive was essentially to keep the flow of oil maintained. But then, once the operation was underway, what is now the goal of NATO's operation and how much influence are France, Britain and the US likely to have now on the future shape of Libya?

I didn't say that it was to keep the flow of oil. I raised that issue only in the negative form. They wanted to avoid being confronted with the obligation to impose oil sanctions on Libya like those they have now placed on Syria. Otherwise, of course, had they let Gaddafi carry out the massacre, he would have been happy to keep selling them oil. He concluded oil deals with all Western countries, Italy especially, but also Germany, Britain, Spain, etc. So we are not dealing with a situation where the regime is anti-Western. Western sanctions against Gaddafi were lifted in 2004, after he gave George Bush and Tony Blair the gift of proclaiming that he was so impressed by them that he decided to get rid of his weapons of mass destruction. They were very happy with that because they thought it gave some credence to the WMD pretext of their invasion of Iraq at a time when they were clearly failing to produce any evidence of WMD there. Gaddafi has been visited in his tent since then by most Western leaders, as well as by hawks and neocons like Richard Perle, Bernard Lewis, Francis Fukuyama, Third-Way theorist Anthony Giddens, etc. They all paid him a visit and have been generously rewarded for that. So there was definitely no Western impulse for regime change in Libya in the years before 2011.

When the Arab uprising started, and after the successes of the masses in Tunisia and Egypt in toppling their pro-Western dictators, Western powers felt obliged to pretend that they stood on the side of the mass movement for democracy. At the beginning of the protests in Tunisia, the French government supported Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, a fact that turned into a big embarrassment in domestic politics. Nicolas Sarkozy needed to distance himself from this shameful attitude. He thus tried to outbid everyone in support for the Libyan revolution and it was all the more easy for him because France was not among the countries that maintained privileged ties with Gaddafi's Libya.

Washington remained circumspect when the 'Arab Spring' started, and then felt it needed to come out in support of democracy. It did so in Egypt even though the dictator there was one of Washington's closest allies. Gaddafi was certainly not dearer to Washington and London and Western leaders in general, with the exception of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, than Mubarak was. So when Gaddafi went into his frenzy of repression and killing of those whom he called rats and insects, Western leaders could not turn a blind eye to that, especially given that they faced direct calls for help and intervention from the people in Benghazi who also confronted the Arab regimes with the same demands, leading the Arab League to call for the no-fly zone before the UN resolution.

A situation built up in which it became compelling for Western powers to intervene for all the reasons I have described, oil being of course central to them. Now once they started their intervention and Gaddafi proved more stubborn and his regime more resilient than expected, they needed to carry on their bombing until the regime fell or bowed. Otherwise they would lose face; lose their 'credibility' as they like to say. Their single concern then became how to steer the war in a way that would lead to the best-case scenario in their mind. What is this best-case scenario? Given Gaddafi's stubbornness, they needed him to clear the scene. But above all they want a stable government in Libya, able to continue doing business as usual with Western companies and governments. And that is why NATO's main concern has been to make sure that what they call the 'Iraq example' is not repeated. They refer to what is considered in Western capitals as the fatal mistake of dismantling the Baathist state that the Bush administration made when it invaded Iraq. All the Baathist state's key structures, including the army, the repressive apparatus, the ruling party – all of that was disbanded. As the occupation of Iraq turned into a disaster for the US and the UK, they drew the conclusion that what they needed to do in Libya was to secure a transition which would keep the bulk of the regime's institutions in place.

That's essentially why they have been waging this campaign of relatively low intensity, while refusing to deliver weapons to the insurgents and conducting intensive negotiations with the Gaddafi regime. News of direct and indirect negotiations between Western governments and members of Gaddafi's entourage, like his son Saif al-Islam, has leaked repeatedly to the world press. They wanted to get a deal with the regime's men and then exert pressure on the rebellion to accept it. Contacts took place also between the Transitional National Council and the Gaddafi regime under NATO pressure, but all these negotiations led nowhere. The main stumbling block was Gaddafi himself. There was no way the rebellion could accept him to remain nominally and officially the head of the Libyan state and he refused to step down from power. Nevertheless, NATO kept its combination of bombing and negotiations, hoping that once there was a reversal in the military situation Gaddafi's entourage would see that things are getting dangerous for them and would push Gaddafi aside and cut a deal with NATO, which would then impose it on the rebellion.

The idea for NATO was basically to sponsor a deal between the leading groups in the Gaddafi regime and the rebellion with NATO acting as the umpire, the arbiter of the situation. London played a key role in designing such a blueprint. A Financial Times editorial was saying only a few days before the liberation of Tripoli that the rebels should not launch an assault on the city. The pretext given was that if they did there would be a bloodbath and thus it would be preferable that they only exert pressure on the regime in order to remove Gaddafi. The Economist had earlier said the same. These are the key mouthpieces of the British ruling class.

That's what NATO was contemplating. At the moment, however, it looks like this scenario is doomed because of the unexpected sudden collapse of the structures of the regime in Tripoli. It looks like it was only wishful thinking for NATO to believe that they could keep the basic repressive structures of a regime which has been shaped over decades as the private business and private militia of the ruling family. It can't work that way in a situation where the people are being armed, with a majority of the armed rebels being civilians turned fighters for the occasion. This is a real popular revolution, a real popular rebellion. A lot of the rebels would hardly accept the continuation of the structures of Gaddafi's regime.

Some people have suggested that the rebels themselves have been usurped by NATO but what you are

saying is that the real plan was to keep the regime and use the rebellion to pressure Gaddafi to go. So are you saying that NATO failed in that respect and how do the rebels fit into this picture? It has been pointed out that there are former members of the regime leading the rebellion.

Of course there are former members of the regime among the people who are leading the rebellion. After forty years of a totalitarian regime, what do you expect? Are you surprised that there are people who held positions within the state, within the regime, who had little other choices to make their living in a country where the state is omnipresent, but who resent the dictatorship and the madness of the dictator? We know from interviews with people who have been close collaborators of Gaddafi that many were appalled by his farcical behaviour. Anyone with a minimum of intelligence would resent this guy. That is why, except for unconditional admirers of the leader and people who are benefiting from his largesse, so many individuals switched from regime ranks to opposition ranks as soon as the movement began.

If this were any reason to hold a negative attitude towards the Libyan insurrection, then what can one say about Egypt? There the army was seen as supportive of the protests in the sense that it refused to repress them and finally parted ways with Mubarak. What do you have now in Egypt? It is essentially the continuation of the same regime. This doesn't mean though that what happened in Egypt was not important. It was a very important upheaval, but the revolutionary process is still ongoing and political struggles are raging. Likewise in Libya the downfall of Gaddafi won't be the end of the story. The fight will continue – hopefully political rather than military. One of the main issues at stake will of course be the nature of the new state and the degree to which there should be a radical break with the previous institutions.

The Transitional National Council circles include a few champions of neoliberal reforms – more in the executive committee, i.e. the cabinet, than in the TNC itself. Among those who came back from exile, there is Khalifa Haftar, a CIA asset. Such people are there. But as far as we know, they carry little weight in the rebellion and are actually resented and ostracised by a lot of the rebels. When the TNC makes big proclamations of gratitude towards NATO, we know from many reports that among the rebels there is no real gratitude towards it, there is rather a sense of frustration over the way in which NATO has dealt with the situation.

Many Libyans believe that in some way they hired NATO's services like Gaddafi hired mercenaries. They called for help and got it from the Western powers that are looking forward to being remunerated for that, and they assure them that they will get rewarded. They will tell you, 'We will carry on making deals with them as Gaddafi's regime was doing anyway.' Believing this is an illusion of course. But the belief that NATO can control the situation from afar and without boots on the ground is also an illusion. Many people in NATO circles are aware of that and have therefore designed plans for sending troops on the ground.

For a number of reasons, political, financial, and military, though it would be very difficult for NATO to send Western troops. The main reason is that the rebels don't want foreign troops on Libyan soil and this has been their position from day one when they requested help. They said, 'We want a no-fly zone, but we don't want troops on the ground.' The point is that, without such troops, NATO will find itself with little leverage once Gaddafi is out of the picture. This is because the leverage they have today is mostly due to their calculated indispensability to the rebellion in the war against Gaddafi's forces. But once this stage is over that leverage will shrink, and that is why they are designing scenarios for a ground intervention under a UN cover of forces from some Arab and maybe some African states, closely linked to Western powers, plus Turkey, a NATO member. Turkey is today very much at the forefront of NATO's Libyan operation and it is looking forward to playing a major role in the country and obtaining important economic benefits.

Now even if we suppose that the TNC would accept such a scenario of foreign troop deployment (a hypothesis that is highly unlikely at the present stage, short of a chaotic deterioration of conditions in their country), they would have a

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hard time selling it to the rebellion, to the masses of people who fought for freedom and self-determination. In the Libyan situation there is a wide gap between NATO's blueprint and what we will see on the ground. It won't be the first time that we have seen such a discrepancy between imperialist designs and the reality. Think of Afghanistan, think of Iraq. It will be the case in Libya as well; all the more so in the absence of Western troops on the ground and in the presence of a genuine popular uprising.

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