

# Media Erase NATO Role in Bringing Slave Markets to Libya

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*Twenty-first century slave markets. Human beings sold for a few hundred dollars. Massive protests throughout the world.*

*The American and British media have awakened to the grim reality in Libya, where African refugees are for sale in open-air slave markets. Yet a crucial detail in this scandal has been downplayed or even ignored in many corporate media reports: the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in bringing slavery to the North African nation.*

In March 2011, NATO launched a war in Libya expressly aimed at toppling the government of longtime leader Muammar Qadhafi. The US and its allies flew some [26,000 sorties](#) over Libya and launched hundreds of cruise missiles, destroying the government's ability to resist rebel forces.

US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with their European counterparts, insisted the military intervention was being carried out for humanitarian reasons. But political scientist Micah Zenko (*Foreign Policy*, [3/22/16](#)) used NATO's own materials to show how "the Libyan intervention was about regime change from the very start."

NATO supported an array of rebel groups fighting on the ground in Libya, many of which were dominated by Islamist extremists and harbored violently racist views. Militants in the NATO-backed rebel stronghold of Misrata even [referred](#) to themselves in 2011 as "the brigade for purging slaves, black skin"—an eerie foreshadowing of the horrors that were to come.

The war ended in October 2011. US and European aircraft attacked Qadhafi's convoy, and he was brutally murdered by extremist rebels—sodomized with a bayonet. Secretary Clinton, who played a [decisive role](#) in the war, declared live on CBS News ([10/20/11](#)), "We came, we saw, he died!" The Libyan government dissolved soon after.

In the six years since, Libya has been roiled by chaos and bloodshed. Multiple would-be governments are competing for control of the oil-rich country, and in some areas there is still no functioning central authority. Many thousands of people have died, although the true numbers are impossible to verify. Millions of Libyans have been displaced—a staggering number, nearly one-third of the population, had [fled](#) to neighboring Tunisia by 2014.

Corporate media, however, have largely forgotten about the key role NATO played in destroying Libya's government, destabilizing the country and empowering human traffickers.

Moreover, even the few news reports that do acknowledge NATO's complicity in the chaos in Libya do not go a step further and detail the well-documented, violent racism of the NATO-backed Libyan rebels who ushered in slavery after ethnically cleansing and committing brutal crimes against black Libyans.

O NATO, Where Art Thou?

CNN ([11/14/17](#)) published an explosive story in mid-November that offered a firsthand look at the slave trade in Libya. The media network obtained terrifying video that shows young African refugees being auctioned, "big strong boys for farm work," sold for as little as \$400.



Exclusive report

# People for sale

## Where lives are auctioned for \$400



CNN ([11/14/17](#)) does not bring up the US role in allowing people to be sold.

The flashy CNN multimedia report included bonuses galore: two videos, two animated gifs, two photos and a chart. But something was missing: The 1,000-word story made no mention of NATO, or the 2011 war that destroyed Libya's government, or Muammar Qadhafi, or any kind of historical and political context whatsoever.

Despite these huge flaws, the CNN report was widely celebrated, and made an impact in a corporate media apparatus that otherwise cares little about North Africa. A flurry of media reports followed. These stories overwhelmingly spoke of slavery in Libya as an apolitical and timeless human rights issue, not as a political problem rooted in very recent history.

In subsequent stories, when Libyan and United Nations officials announced they would launch an investigation into the slave auctions, CNN ([11/17/17](#), [11/20/17](#)) again failed to mention the 2011 war, let alone NATO's role in it.

One CNN report ([11/21/17](#)) on a UN Security Council meeting noted, "Ambassadors from

Senegal to Sweden also blamed trafficking’s root causes: unstable countries, poverty, profits from slave trading and lack of legal enforcement.” But it failed to explain *why* Libya is unstable.

Another 1,200-word CNN follow-up article ([11/23/17](#)) was just as obfuscatory. It was only in the 35th paragraph of this 36-paragraph story that a Human Rights Watch researcher noted, “Libyan interim authorities have been dragging their feet on virtually all investigations they supposedly started, yet never concluded, since the 2011 uprising.” NATO’s leadership in this 2011 uprising was, however, ignored.

An Agence France-Presse news wire that was published by Voice of America ([11/17/17](#)) and other websites similarly failed to provide any historical context for the political situation in Libya. “Testimony collected by AFP in recent years has revealed a litany of rights abuses at the hands of gang leaders, human traffickers and the Libyan security forces,” the article said, but it did not recount anything that happened before 2017.

Reports by the BBC ([11/18/17](#)), the New York Times ([11/20/17](#)), Deutsche Welle (reprinted by USA Today, [11/23/17](#)) and the Associated Press (reprinted by the Washington Post, [11/23/17](#)) also failed to mention the 2011 war, let alone NATO’s role in it.



The screenshot shows the top portion of a New York Times article. At the top left is a hamburger menu icon, followed by a 't' icon and a magnifying glass search icon. The New York Times logo is centered at the top. To the right is a user profile icon. Below the navigation is the word 'AFRICA' in all caps. The main title of the article is 'Sale of Migrants as Slaves in Libya Causes Outrage in Africa and Paris' in a large, bold, serif font. Below the title, it says 'By NOUR YOUSSEF NOV. 19, 2017'. To the right of the byline are icons for Facebook, Twitter, Email, and a share icon.



A New York Times story ([11/19/17](#)) was exceptional in connecting the rise in Libyan slavery to Muammar Qadhafi’s overthrow—yet it failed to mention the US’s leading role in that overthrow.

Another New York Times story ([11/19/17](#)) did provide a bit of context:

Since the Arab Spring uprising of 2011 ended the brutal rule of Col. Muammar

el-Qaddafi, Libya's coast has become a hub for human trafficking and smuggling. That has fueled the illegal migration crisis that Europe has been scrambling to contain since 2014. Libya, which slid into chaos and civil war after the revolt, is now divided among three main factions.

Yet the Times still erased NATO's key place in this uprising of 2011.

In an account of the large protests that erupted outside Libyan embassies in Europe and Africa in response to reports of slave auctions, Reuters ([11/20/17](#)) indicated, "Six years after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya is still a lawless state where armed groups compete for land and resources and people-smuggling networks operate with impunity." But it did not provide any more information about how Qadhafi was toppled.

A report in the Huffington Post ([11/22/17](#)), later republished by AOL ([11/27/17](#)), did concede that Libya is "one of the world's most unstable [sic], mired in conflict since dictator Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed in 2011." It made no mention of NATO's leadership in that ousting and killing.

Part of the problem has been the unwillingness of international organizations to point out the responsibility of powerful Western governments. In his statement on the reports of slavery in Libya, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres ([11/20/17](#)) did not mention anything about what has happened politically inside the North African nation in the past six years. The UN News Centre report ([11/20/17](#)) on Guterres' comments was just as contextless and uninformative, as was the press release ([11/21/17](#)) on the issue from the International Organization for Migration.

Al Jazeera ([11/26/17](#)) did cite an IOM official who suggested, in Al Jazeera's words, that "the international community should pay more attention to post-Gaddafi Libya." But the media outlet provided no context as to how Libya became post-Qadhafi in the first place. In fact, Al Jazeera's source went out of his way to make the issue apolitical: "Modern-day slavery is widespread around the world and Libya is by no means unique."

While it is true that slavery and human trafficking happen in other countries, this widespread media narrative depoliticizes the problem in Libya, which has its roots in explicit political decisions made by governments and their leaders: namely, the choice to overthrow Libya's stable government, turning the oil-rich North African nation into a failed state ruled by competing warlords and militias, some of which are involved in and profit from slavery and trafficking.

#### Selective Attention to NATO's Aftermath in Libya

Corporate media reporting on Libya largely mirrors reporting on Yemen (FAIR.org, [11/20/17](#), [8/31/17](#), [2/27/17](#)), Syria (FAIR.org, [4/7/17](#), [9/5/15](#)) and beyond: The role of the US government and its allies in creating chaos abroad is minimized, if not outright ignored.

Strikingly, one of the only exceptions to this overwhelming media trend came back in April from, of all places, the New York Times editorial board. The Times editorial ([4/14/17](#)) did not mince words, directly linking the US-backed military operation to the ongoing catastrophe:

None of this would be possible if not for the political chaos in Libya since the civil war in 2011, when — with the involvement of a NATO coalition that included the United States — Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi was toppled. Migrants have become the gold that finances Libya’s warring factions.

This is a significant reversal. Immediately after NATO launched its war in Libya in March 2011, the Times editorial board ([3/21/11](#)) cheered on the bombing, effusing, “Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi has long been a thug and a murderer who has never paid for his many crimes.” It waxed poetic on the “extraordinary,” “astonishing” military intervention, and hoped for Qadhafi’s imminent downfall.

The April 2017 Times editorial stopped far short of a being a mea culpa, yet it was still a rare admission of truth.

At the time this surprisingly honest editorial was written, there had briefly been a bit of media attention to Libya. The International Organization for Migration had just conducted an investigation into slavery in post-regime change Libya, leading to a string of news reports in the Guardian ([4/10/17](#)) and elsewhere. Practically as soon as this appalling story got the interest of corporate media, however, it quickly died out. Attention shifted back to Russia, North Korea and the bogeymen of the day.



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## Migrants from west Africa being ‘sold in Libyan slave markets’

UN migration agency says selling of people is rife in African nation that has slid into violent chaos since overthrow of Gaddafi

This Guardian piece ([4/10/17](#)) cites “the overthrow of autocratic leader Muammar Qadhafi,” but does not say that the US (or Britain) was instrumental in overthrowing him.

When Western governments were hoping to militarily intervene in the country in the lead-up to March 19, 2011, there was a constant torrent of media reports on the evils of Qadhafi and his government—including a healthy dose of fake news (Salon, [9/16/16](#)). Major newspapers staunchly [supported the NATO intervention](#), and made no secret of their pro-war editorial

lines.

When the US government and its allies were preparing for war, the corporate media apparatus did what it does best, and helped sell yet another military intervention to the public.

In the years since, on the other hand, there has been exponentially less interest in the disastrous aftermath of that NATO war. There will be short spikes of interest, as there was in early 2017. The most recent spurt of press coverage was inspired by the publication of CNN's shocking video footage. But the coverage invariably rapidly peaks and goes away.

### The Extreme Racism of Libyan Rebels

The catastrophe Libya might endure after the collapse of its state had been predictable at the time. Qadhafi himself had [warned](#) NATO member states, while they were waging war against him, that they were going to unleash chaos throughout the region. Yet Western leaders—Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in the US, David Cameron in the UK, Nicolas Sarkozy in France, Stephen Harper in Canada—ignored Qadhafi's admonition and violently toppled his government.

Even from the small number of media reports on slavery in Libya that do manage to acknowledge NATO's responsibility for destabilizing the country, nevertheless, something is still missing.

Looking back at Libya's anti-Qadhafi rebels, both during and after the 2011 war, it is very clear that hardline anti-black racism was widespread in the NATO-backed opposition. A 2016 investigation by the British House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee (Salon, [9/16/16](#)) acknowledged that "militant Islamist militias played a critical role in the rebellion from February 2011 onwards." But many rebels were not just fundamentalist; they were also violently racist.

It is unfortunately no surprise that these extremist Libyan militants later enslaved African refugees and migrants: They were hinting at it from the very beginning.

Most American and European media coverage at the time of NATO's military intervention was decidedly pro-rebel. When reporters got on the ground, however, they began publishing a few more nuanced pieces that hinted at the reality of the opposition. These were insignificant in number, but they are enlightening and worth revisiting.

Three months into the NATO war, in June 2011, the Wall Street Journal's Sam Dagher ([6/21/11](#)) reported from Misrata, Libya's third-largest city and a major hub for the opposition, where he noted he saw rebel slogans like "the brigade for purging slaves, black skin."

Dagher indicated that the rebel stronghold of Misrata was dominated by "tightly knit white merchant families," whereas "the south of the country, which is predominantly black, mainly backs Col. Gadhafi."

Other graffiti in Misrata read "Traitors keep out." By "traitors," rebels were referring to Libyans from the town of Tawergha, which the Journal explained is "inhabited mostly by black Libyans, a legacy of its 19th-century origins as a transit town in the slave trade."

Dagher reported that some Libyan rebel leaders were “calling for the expulsion of Tawerghans from the area” and “banning Tawergha natives from ever working, living or sending their children to schools in Misrata.” He added that predominately Tawergha neighborhoods in Misrata had already been emptied. Black Libyans were “gone or in hiding, fearing revenge attacks by Misratans, amid reports of bounties for their capture.”

The rebel commander Ibrahim al-Halbous told the Journal, “Tawergha no longer exists, only Misrata.”

Al-Halbous would later reappear in a report by the Sunday Telegraph ([9/11/11](#)), reiterating to the British newspaper, “Tawarga no longer exists.” (When Halbous was injured in September, the New York Times—[9/20/11](#)—portrayed him sympathetically as a martyr in the heroic fight against Qadhafi. The Halbous brigade has in the years since become an [influential](#) militia in Libya.)

Like Dagher, the Telegraph’s Andrew Gilligan drew attention to the slogan painted on the road between Misrata and Tawergha: “the brigade for purging slaves [and] black skin.”

Gilligan reported from Tawergha, or rather from the remnants of the majority-black town, which he noted had “been emptied of its people, vandalized and partly burned by rebel forces.” A rebel leader said of the dark-skinned residents, “We said if they didn’t go, they would be conquered and imprisoned. Every single one of them has left, and we will never allow them to come back.”

Gilligan noted “a racist undercurrent. Many Tawargas, though neither immigrants nor Gaddafi’s much-ballyhooed African mercenaries, are descended from slaves, and are darker than most Libyans.”

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization assisted these virulently racist rebels in Misrata. NATO forces frequently launched [air attacks](#) on the city. [French fighter jets](#) shot down Libyan planes over Misrata. The [US and UK](#) fired cruise missiles at Libyan government targets, and the US launched Predator drone strikes. The [Canadian air force](#) also attacked Libyan forces, pushing them out of Misrata.

In a public relations video NATO published in May 2011, early in the Libya war, the Western military alliance openly admitted that it intentionally allowed “Libyan rebels to transport arms from Benghazi to Misrata.” Political scientist Micah Zenko (Foreign Policy, [3/22/16](#)) pointed out the implications of this video: “A NATO surface vessel stationed in the Mediterranean to enforce an arms embargo did exactly the opposite, and NATO was comfortable posting a video demonstrating its hypocrisy.”

Throughout the war and after, Libyan rebels continued carrying out racist sectarian attacks against their black compatriots. These attacks have been well documented by mainstream human rights organizations.

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# Libya: Stop Arbitrary Arrests of Black Africans

Vulnerable Migrant Workers in Tripoli Need Protection



Human Rights Watch ([9/4/11](#)) documented racist persecution in post-Qadhafi Libya.

Human Rights Watch's longtime executive director [Kenneth Roth](#) cheered on NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, calling the UN Security Council's unanimous endorsement of a no-fly zone a "remarkable" confirmation of the so-called "responsibility to protect" doctrine.

Roth's organization, however, could not ignore the crimes anti-Qadhafi militants committed against dark-skinned Libyans and migrants.

In September 2011, when the war was still ongoing, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) on Libyan rebels' "arbitrary arrests and abuse of African migrant workers and black Libyans assumed to be [pro-Qadhafi] mercenaries."

Then in October, the top US human rights organization noted that [Libyan militias](#) were "terrorizing the displaced residents of the nearby town of Tawergha," the majority-black community that had been a stronghold of support for Qadhafi. "The entire town of 30,000 people is abandoned—some of it ransacked and burned—and Misrata brigade commanders say the residents of Tawergha should never return," HRW added. Witnesses "gave credible accounts of some Misrata militias shooting unarmed Tawerghans, and of arbitrary arrests and beatings of Tawergha detainees, in a few cases leading to death."

In 2013, HRW reported further on the [ethnic cleansing](#) of the black community of Tawergha. The human rights organization, whose chief had so effusively supported the military intervention, wrote: "The forced displacement of roughly 40,000 people, arbitrary detentions, torture and killings are widespread, systematic and sufficiently organized to be crimes against humanity."

These atrocities are undeniable, and they lead a path straight to the enslavement of African



refugees and migrants. But to acknowledge NATO's complicity in empowering these racist extremist militants, corporate media would have to acknowledge NATO's role in the 2011 regime change war in Libya in the first place.

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