

Ten Years Ago, US-NATO Regime Change Operation in Libya

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In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

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The United States-NATO invasion of Libya was launched a decade ago this month, as the Western powers engineered the ousting of the country's leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who had been in power for more than 40 years.

A central reason behind this military assault, which began on 19 March 2011, was to reinforce Western control over Libya's oil wells. Libya has long held the largest oil reserves in Africa, and it contains greater quantities of this resource than either the superpowers of America or China.

The quality of Libya's oil is particularly high and its cost low; 92% of the nation's revenue came from trading in it. What's more, Western oil specialists believe it likely that Libya possesses large volumes of undiscovered oil deposits, on top of the ample sources which it already has. With good reason, much of Libya remains unexplored. The country consists mostly of a treeless, barren landscape which stretches out for hundreds of miles over the horizon. Libya is a highly complex nation, a semi-tribal society with an array of beliefs, loyalties and kinship.

As part of the Middle East and North African countries (MENA), the significance of Libya becomes apparent. Former US president Dwight Eisenhower called the Middle East “the most strategically important area of the world”, mainly due to its enormous oil sources. Libya has a broad coastline resting on the Mediterranean Sea, a body of water critical to the exportation of raw materials for the world market.

Fears over radical nationalism prevailed also regarding Libya. The US-NATO attack involved the elimination of the independent nationalist threat from Libya; both through the removal of Gaddafi, and by nipping the Arab Spring uprising in the bud, while encouraging a civil war. It was no coincidence, just as Libya was being bombarded by NATO warplanes, that the Arab Spring protests had been taking off in parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

Before the US-NATO intervention started, political leaders such as Fidel Castro of Cuba wrote of the Americans on 9 March 2011,

“The empire is now attempting to turn events around to what Gaddafi has done or not done, because it needs to militarily intervene in Libya, and deliver a blow to the revolutionary wave unleashed in the Arab world”. (1)

The spectre of uncontrollable nationalist movements has been a leading concern of Anglo-American governments for decades. Henry Kissinger, former US National Security Advisor (1969-1975), summarised the feeling in Washington by saying that an area which falls outside of US auspices can become a “virus” that will “spread contagion”, and which must be inoculated.

Civilian welfare in Libya again proved a low priority – and was cynically exploited as a justification for the Western intervention following their procurement, on 17 March 2011, of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, calling for a “no-fly zone” over Libya.

Moniz Bandeira, the experienced Brazilian historian, wrote that,

“The United States, Britain and France didn’t establish the no-fly zone to protect civilians, an ambiguous and questionable concept introduced through resolutions on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and approved by the UN Security Council. They carried out the war against Libya through air strikes and by allying themselves openly with the rebels, just as Nazi Germany had done during the civil war in Spain (1936-1939), when it not only bombed Guernica, but several other cities”. (2)

Among the NATO goals was to prevent a peaceful, negotiated settlement that may have favoured the unreliable Gaddafi; and, in turn, could have harmed Western hegemony across North Africa and beyond. Gaddafi accepted in principle the careful diplomatic proposals put forth by the African Union (3), and which had the consent of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Gaddafi’s attempt, to seek dialogue through a position of strength, was brushed aside in the West. As though he were a global police chief, Barack Obama said on 3 March 2011 that Gaddafi “has lost the legitimacy to lead and he *must leave*”.



Moreover, China's growing presence in North Africa was viewed in Washington as an encroachment on its regional interests. By the start of 2011 China had invested around \$18.8 billion in Libya, through 75 companies (4). More than 10% of Libya's oil exports were being sold to Beijing. Three of China's biggest oil corporations had developed projects in Libya at this point: the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the Sinopec Group, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

Some of these Chinese sites were attacked in Libya, as the upheaval grew. Around the time of the NATO bombardment, there were 36,000 Chinese in Libya, mostly construction workers employed on infrastructural programs. They thereafter had to be evacuated from the country. It reveals something about international affairs, that while China was involved in strengthening Libya's industry and infrastructure, the Western powers were more intent on raining down bombs from the air.

The no-fly zone had been a grotesque notion, and was violated instantly, beginning with air strikes from French Rafale and Mirage aircraft. In coming months, NATO warplanes would carry out around 9,600 air raids over Libya, destroying approximately 5,900 targets (5). These attacks led to a sharply increased rate of civilian casualties, which rose at least tenfold following the US-NATO invasion (6), leaving Libya in the hands of warring militias and fanning the flames of terrorism even further. NATO's "humanitarian intervention" in Libya also sent a wave of refugees from North Africa to Europe. Another of Washington's unstated aims here, was to take over lucrative regions of Africa that had traditionally been under French control.

Meanwhile, the Arab Spring was looked on with much concern in Washington, London and Paris, whose staunch allies in the Middle East are the oil dictator countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The Arab Spring protests, we can note, barely took off the ground in these states, where few calls were heard from the western democracies that the autocrats be removed. Such an outcome, whereby the masses seek to influence their own affairs, could easily result in a diminishing of US control over the Middle East's oil, as is well known.

A Gaddafi victory against the insurgents would have enhanced his prestige and independence, an unacceptable outcome for US-NATO. Gaddafi was viewed with some misgiving in the West; he did not routinely obey orders, was unpredictable and erratic. Having met Gaddafi on a number of occasions through the decades, Castro described him in March 2011 as “a Bedouin Arab soldier of unusual character and inspired by the ideas of the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser”. (7)

Nasser had strong nationalist beliefs, was independent-minded and a social reformer. As a result, he was viewed with alarm from the mid-1950s onward. Panicky officials in Washington and London called Nasser “a new Hitler”. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles believed Nasser to be “an extremely dangerous fanatic” with a “Hitlerite personality”, and the Americans were grateful when Israel put the brakes on Nasser during the Six-Day War.

By 12 March 2011, Gaddafi was on course for victory versus the anti-government forces, as his army captured strategically important Libyan towns such as Ra’s Lanuf; before the US-NATO attack, beginning the following week, quickly turned the tables on him. Bandeira observed how, “Without NATO’s logistical support and bombing campaign” and “without the flow of CIA intelligence supplied by the drones, the so-called rebels would not have advanced far beyond Benghazi”.

The “freedom fighters” opposing Gaddafi, whom the Western media were championing, comprised largely of contingents tied to terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG); along with hundreds of other men with extremist pasts, previously pardoned by Gaddafi and who were roaming freely in Libya. Among them initially were 350 militants with backgrounds mainly from the LIFG, who in 2009 had moved on to Benghazi. By early 2011, this number rose to 850 in Benghazi (8). Many of the freed insurgents would link up with Al Qaeda, in a bid to foment unrest and topple Gaddafi, who was hated by conservative Islam and the above terrorist groups.

Furthermore, radical Muslims, Salafists who had been exiled by Gaddafi, were returning to Libya through Mali, Egypt and other nations. Benghazi was a centre of radical, Salafist Islam in Libya, as was the city of Derna just over 150 miles east of Benghazi.

Among the members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was Abu Yahya al-Libi, a hardline extremist from Libya and top level member of Al Qaeda. Al-Libi was described by ex-CIA analyst Jarret Brachman as a “rising star within Al Qaeda, and I think he has become the heir apparent to Osama bin Laden in terms of taking over the entire global jihadist movement” (9). While pursuing jihad against Gaddafi, Al-Libi publicly supported the terrorist campaigns aimed at Chinese authorities in Xinjiang province, north-western China.

Bin Laden himself gave his blessing to the terrorists in Libya. He called such “revolutions” made by his “Libyan brothers” as “a great and glorious event”. The elusive Egyptian-born Al Qaeda chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri – who would shortly succeed Bin Laden – had dispatched veteran jihadists to Libya in early 2011, so as to build a base of operations there against Gaddafi (10). The first revolts in opposition to the Gaddafi regime began between the 13th and 16th of January 2011, in the cities of Benghazi and also Beyad and Derna, all in north-eastern Libya; that is, in the region of Cyrenaica, a province of Libya with traditionally separatist leanings, and which happens to contain about 80% of the country’s known oil reserves.

During these opening actions, public buildings and police barracks were attacked, as the terrorists killed dozens of soldiers and policemen (11). Some were executed, either decapitated or hanged. These acts were not spontaneous but had clearly been planned and coordinated, as an air base and police station were captured.

Since Gaddafi's taking of power in 1969, Benghazi had never completely accepted his rule. To complicate matters, some of the indigenous groups in Libya, such as the Tuareg, Warfalla and Hasawna tribes, were far from friendly to Gaddafi. They would support the armed revolts.

Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi, head of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, admitted in late March 2011 that Al Qaeda members were operating under his command (12). For instance, they were engaging in combat against Gaddafi's troops in the town of Ajdabiya, north-eastern Libya. Al-Hasidi said that the Al Qaeda fighters he was leading were "good Muslims".

The US-NATO alliance was supplying many of the extremists with funds, weaponry and logistical assistance. This included information pertaining to the planning of operations, and the guiding of bombings such as drone attacks, in which the CIA was instrumental. Autocratic, Western-backed countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan had all dispatched elite soldiers to bolster Gaddafi's foes, as likewise did Bulgaria, a NATO and EU state (13). Qatar and the UAE further provided airplanes to NATO over a six month period during the bombing campaign, while other nations like Bahrain and Oman co-operated with NATO.

Mustafa al-Gherryani, spokesman for the anti-Gaddafi insurgents, said that arms were being imported to Libya from neighbouring countries such as Egypt. The weapons were paid for by the Americans. Passing through Libya's eastern frontier, this military hardware was sent with Washington's consent by the Egyptian Army. It was delivered to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and to jihadists of Al Qaeda's factions in North Africa. NATO's supreme commander in Europe, Admiral James Stavridis, acknowledged at the end of March 2011, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, that US intelligence services had detected "flickers" of Al Qaeda among the rebel forces. (14)

There is clear evidence that the anti-Gaddafi revolt was, in fact, at least partly instigated by the imperial powers to begin with. France at this time was led by the unpopular right-wing president Nicolas Sarkozy. He was recently sentenced to jail for corruption, amid other damaging claims that his successful 2007 election campaign received significant funding from Gaddafi (15). The Italian journalist Franco Bechis wrote on 23 March 2011 that, under Sarkozy, France's foreign intelligence agency DGSE "had probably started planning the rebellion in Benghazi on October 21, 2010", many weeks before the uprising began.

Also during October 2010, Gaddafi's intelligence chief Nuri al-Mismari fled Libya, passing through neighbouring Tunisia as he sought exile in France. Once on French soil, Al-Mismari met with France's military and started to scheme against Gaddafi - a plot which involved enemies of Libya's government based in Benghazi.

Present on Libyan soil prior to the March 2011 US-NATO invasion were: CIA advisors, US Navy SEALs, British MI6 spies, and Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers from the British Army (16). In Libya too were French secret agents from the above-mentioned DGSE, and commandos from the French Army Special Forces Command. These elite units from the triumvirate of America, Britain and France were often dressed as Arabs, therefore posing as

“false flaggers”; in order to conceal their identities from Libyans, and allow them to provoke resistance unmolested. So much then for the Western powers not having “boots on the ground” in Libya.

For example on 24 February 2011, just over three weeks before the NATO assault started, a British frigate HMS Cumberland sailed into the port of Benghazi, and disembarking from this vessel were British SAS commandos. (17)

London had already dispatched MI6 agents and SAS officers to consult with forces headed by Libya’s former Minister of Justice, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, a strong critic of Gaddafi who was co-operating with the West. From March 2011 until August 2012, Jalil was chairman of the so-called National Transitional Council (NTC), which was seeking to replace Gaddafi. From early on, allying itself with the NTC were the extremists of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (18), as members of this latter organisation had announced to the press in March 2011.

Another high-ranking Gaddafi official who defected to the West was Moussa Koussa, Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs from March 2009 to March 2011. Koussa was previously co-opted by MI6, Britain’s foreign intelligence agency (19). On 28 March 2011, he travelled by car across Libya’s north-western border to Tunisia, where he got in contact with London. Koussa then climbed aboard a Swiss private airplane at Djerba Airport in Tunisia, and flew directly to the English capital.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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3 Noam Chomsky, *Who Rules The World?* (Metropolitan Books, Penguin Books Ltd, Hamish Hamilton, 5 May 2016) p. 251

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14 Lara Marlowe, "'Flickers' of Al Qaeda among rebels, says NATO chief", [Irish Times](#), 30 March 2011

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18 Konye Obaji Ori, "Libya: The mosque and the State", [The Africa Report](#), 5 December 2013

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