

The Euro-US War on Libya: Official Lies and Misconceptions of Critics

By [Prof. James Petras](#) and [Robin E. Abaya](#)

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Introduction

Many critics of the ongoing Euro-US wars in the Middle East and, now, North Africa, have based their arguments on clichés and generalizations devoid of fact. The most common line heard in regard to the current US-Euro war on Libya is that it's "all about oil" – the goal is the seizure of Libya's oil wells.

On the other hand Euro -U.S, government spokespeople defend the war by claiming it's "all about saving civilian lives in the face of genocide", calling it "humanitarian intervention".

Following the lead of their imperial powers, most of what passes for the Left in the US and Europe, ranging from Social Democrats, Marxists, Trotskyists, Greens and other assorted progressives claim they see and support a revolutionary mass uprising of the Libyan people, and not a few have called for military intervention by the imperial powers, or the same thing, the UN, to help the "Libyan revolutionaries" defeat the Gaddafi dictatorship.

These arguments are without foundation and belie the true nature of US-UK-French imperial power, expansionist militarism, as evidenced in all the ongoing wars over the past decade (Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc.). What is much more revealing about the militarist intervention in Libya is that the major countries, which refused to engage in the War, operate via a very different form of global expansion based on economic and market forces. China, India, Brazil, Russia, Turkey and Germany, the most dynamic capitalist countries in Asia, Europe and the Middle East are fundamentally opposed to the self-styled "allied" military response against the Libyan government – because Gaddafi represents no threat to their security and they already have full access to the oil and a favorable investment climate. Besides, these economically dynamic countries see no prospect for a stable, progressive or democratic Libyan government emerging from the so-called 'rebel' leaders, who are disparate elites competing for power and Western favor.

(1) The Six Myths about Libya: Right and Left

The principle imperial powers and their mass media mouthpieces claim they are bombing Libya for "humanitarian reasons". Their recent past and current military interventions present a different picture: The intervention in Iraq resulted in well over a million civilian deaths, four million refugees and the systematic destruction of a complex society and its infrastructure, including its water supplies and sewage treatment, irrigation, electricity grid, factories, not to mention research centers, schools, historical archives, museums and Iraq's extensive social welfare system.

A worse disaster followed the invasion of Afghanistan. What was trumpeted as a 'humanitarian intervention' to liberate Afghan women and drive out the Taliban resulted in a human catastrophe for the Afghan people.

The road to imperial barbarism in Iraq began with 'sanctions', progressed to 'no fly zones', then de facto partition of the north, invasion and foreign occupation and the unleashing of sectarian warfare among the 'liberated' Iraqi death squads.

Equally telling, the imperial assault against Yugoslavia in the 1990's, trotted out as the great "humanitarian war" to stop genocide, led to a 40-day aerial bombardment and destruction of Belgrade and other major cities, the imposition of a gangster terrorist regime (KLA) in Kosovo, the near-total ethnic cleansing of all non-Albanian residents from Kosovo and the construction of the largest US military base on the continent (Camp Bondsteel).

The bombing of Libya has already destroyed major civilian infrastructure, airports, roads, seaports and communication centers, as well as 'military' targets. The blockade of Libya and military attacks have driven out scores of multi-national corporations and led to the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Asian, Eastern European, Sub-Saharan African, Middle Eastern and North African skilled and unskilled immigrant workers and specialists of all types, devastating the economy and creating, virtually overnight, massive unemployment, bread-lines and critical gasoline shortages. Moreover, following the logic of previous imperial military interventions, the seemingly 'restrained' call to patrol the skies via "no fly zone", has led directly to bombing civilian as well as military targets on the ground, and is pushing to overthrow the legitimate government. The current imperial warmongers leading the attack on Libya, just like their predecessors, are not engaged in anything remotely resembling a humanitarian mission: they are destroying the fundamental basis of the civilian lives they claim to be saving – or as an earlier generation of American generals would claim in Vietnam, they are 'destroying the villages in order to save them'.

(2) War for Oil or Oil for Sale?

The 'critical' Left's favorite cliché is that the imperial invasion is all about "seizing control of Libya's oil and turning it over to their multi-nationals". This is despite the fact that US, French and British multinationals (as well as their Asian competitors) had already "taken over" millions of acres of Libyan oil fields without dropping a single bomb. For the past decade, "Big Oil" had been pumping and exporting Libyan oil and gas and reaping huge profits. Gaddafi welcomed the biggest MNC's to exploit the oil wealth of Libya from the early 1990's to the present day. There are more major oil companies doing business in Libya than in most oil producing regions in the world. These include: British Petroleum, with a seven-year contract on two concessions and over \$1 billion dollars in planned investments. Each BP concession exploits huge geographic areas of Libya, one the size of Kuwait and the other the size of Belgium (Libyonline.com). In addition, five Japanese major corporations, including Mitsubishi and Nippon Petroleum, Italy's Eni Gas, British Gas and the US giant Exxon Mobil signed new exploration and exploitation contracts in October 2010. The most recent oil concession signed in January 2010 mainly benefited US oil companies, especially Occidental Petroleum. Other multi-nationals operating in Libya include Royal Dutch Shell, Total (France), Oil India, CNPC (China), Indonesia's Pertamina and Norway's Norsk Hydro (BBC News, 10/03/2005).

Despite the economic sanctions against Libya, imposed by US President Reagan in 1986, US multinational giant, Halliburton, had secured multi-billion dollar gas and oil projects since the 1980's. During his tenure as CEO of Halliburton, former Defense Secretary Cheney led

the fight against these sanctions stating, “as a nation (there is) enormous value having American businesses engaged around the world” (Halliburtonwatch.com). Officially, sanctions against Libya were only lifted under Bush in 2004. Clearly, with all the European and US imperial countries already exploiting Libya oil on a massive scale, the mantra that the “war is about oil” doesn’t hold water or oil!

(3) Gaddafi is a Terrorist

In the run-up to the current military assault on Tripoli, the US Treasury Department’s (and Israel’s special agent) Stuart Levey, authored a sanctions policy freezing \$30 billion dollars in Libyan assets on the pretext that Gaddafi was a murderous tyrant (Washington Post, 3/24/11). However, seven years earlier, Cheney, Bush and Condoleezza Rice had taken Libya off the list of terrorist regimes and ordered Levey and his minions to lift the Reagan-era sanctions.

Every major European power quickly followed suite: Gaddafi was welcomed in European capitals, prime ministers visited Tripoli and Gaddafi reciprocated by unilaterally dismantling his nuclear and chemical weapons programs (BBC, 9/5/2008). Gaddafi became Washington’s partner in its campaign against a broad array of groups, political movements and individuals arbitrarily placed on the US’ “terror list”, arresting, torturing and killing Al Qaeda suspects, expelling Palestinian militants and openly criticizing Hezbollah, Hamas and other opponents of Israel. The United Nations Human Rights Commission gave the Gaddafi regime a clean bill of health in 2010. In the end Gaddafi’s political ‘turnabout’, however much celebrated by the Western elite, did not save him from this massive military assault. The imposition of neo-liberal ‘reforms’, his political ‘apostasy’ and cooperation in the ‘War on Terror’ and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, only weakened the regime. Libya became vulnerable to attack and isolated from any consequential anti-imperialist allies. Gaddafi’s much ballyhooed concessions to the West set his regime up as an easy target for the militarists of Washington, London and Paris, eager for a quick ‘victory’.

(4) The Myth of the Revolutionary Masses

The Left, including the mainly electoral social democrat, green and even left-socialist parties of Europe and the US swallowed the entire mass media propaganda package demonizing the Gaddafi regime while lauding the ‘rebels’. Parroting their imperial mentors, the ‘Left’ justified their support for imperial military intervention in the name of the “revolutionary Libyan people”, the “peace-loving” masses “fighting tyranny” and organizing peoples’ militias to “liberate their country”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The center of the armed uprising is Benghazi, longtime monarchist hotbed of tribal supporters and clients of the deposed King Idris and his family. Idris, until he was overthrown by the young firebrand Col. Gaddafi, had ruled Libya with an iron fist over a semi-feudal backwater and was popular with Washington, having given the US its largest air base (Wheeler) in the Mediterranean. Among the feuding leaders of the “transitional council” in Benghazi (who purport to lead but have few organized followers) one finds neo-liberal expats, who first promoted the Euro-US military invasion envisioning their ride to power on the back of Western missiles. They openly favor dismantling the Libyan state oil companies currently engaged in joint ventures with foreign MNCs. Independent observers have commented on the lack of any clear reformist tendencies, let alone revolutionary organizations or democratic popular movements among the ‘rebels’.

While the US, British and French are firing missiles, loaded with depleted uranium, at the Libyan military and key civilian installations, their 'allies' the armed militias in Benghazi, rather than go to battle against the regime's armed forces, are busy rounding up, arresting and often executing any suspected members of Gaddafi's "revolutionary committees", arbitrarily labeling these civilians as "fifth columnists". The top leaders of these "revolutionary" masses in Benghazi include two recent defectors from what the 'Left' dubs Gaddafi's "murderous regime": Mustafa Abdul Jalil, a former Justice minister, who prosecuted dissenters up to the day before the armed uprising, Mahmoud Jebri, who was prominent in inviting multi-nationals to take over the oil fields (FT, March 23, 2011, p. 7), and Gaddafi's former ambassador to India, Ali Aziz al-Eisawa, who jumped ship as soon as it looked like the uprising appeared to be succeeding. These self-appointed 'leaders' of the rebels who now staunchly support the Euro-US military intervention, were long-time supporters of the Gaddafi's dictatorship and promoters of MNC takeovers of oil and gas fields. The heads of the "rebels" military council is Omar Hariri and General Abdul Fattah Younis, former head of the Ministry of Interior. Both men have long histories (since 1969) of repressing democratic movements within Libya. Given their unsavory background, it is not surprising that these top level military defectors to the 'rebel' cause have been unable to arouse their troops, mostly conscripts, to engage the loyalist forces backing Gaddafi. They too will have to take ride into Tripoli on the coattails of the Anglo-US-French armed forces.

The anti-Gaddafi force's lack of any democratic credentials and mass support is evident in their reliance on foreign imperial armed forces to bring them to power and their subservience to imperial demands. Their abuse and persecution of immigrant workers from Asia, Turkey and especially sub-Sahara Africa, as well as black Libyan citizens, is well documented in the international press. Their brutal treatment of black Libyans, falsely accused of being Gaddafi's "mercenaries", includes torture, mutilation and horrific executions, does not auger well for the advent of a new democratic order, or even the revival of an economy, which has been dependent on immigrant labor, let alone a unified country with national institutions and a national economy.

The self-declared leadership of the "National Transitional Council" is not democratic, nationalist or even capable of uniting the country. These are not credible leaders capable of restoring the economy and creating jobs lost as a result of their armed power grab. No one seriously envisions these 'exiles', tribalists, monarchists and Islamists maintaining the paternalistic social welfare and employment programs created by the Gaddafi government and which gave Libyans the highest per-capita income in Africa.

(5) Al Qaeda

The greatest geographical concentration of suspected terrorists with links to Al Qaeda just happens to be in the areas dominated by the "rebels" (see Alexander Cockburn: Counterpunch, March 24, 2011). For over a decade Gaddafi has been in the forefront of the fight against Al Qaeda, following his embrace of the Bush-Obama 'War on Terror' doctrine. These jihadist Libyans, having honed their skills in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, are now among the ranks of the "rebels" fighting the much more secular Libyan government. Likewise, the tribal chiefs, fundamentalist clerics and monarchists in the East have been active in a "holy war" against Gaddafi welcoming arms and air support from the Anglo-French-US "crusaders" – just like the mullahs and tribal chiefs welcomed the arms and training from the Carter-Reagan White House to overthrow a secular regime in Afghanistan. Once again, imperial intervention is based on 'alliances' with the most retrograde forces.

The composition of the future regime (or regimes, if Libya is divided) is a big question and the prospects of a return to political stability for Big Oil to profitably exploit Libya's resources are dubious.

(6) "Genocide" or Armed Civil War

Unlike all ongoing mass popular Arab uprisings, the Libyan conflict began as an armed insurrection, directed at seizing power by force. Unlike the autocratic rulers of Egypt and Tunisia, Gaddafi has secured a mass regional base among a substantial sector of the Libyan population. This support is based on the fact that almost two generations of Libyans have benefited from Gaddafi's petroleum-financed welfare, educational, employment and housing programs, none of which existed under America's favorite, King Idris. Since violence is inherent in any armed uprising, once one picks up the gun to seize power, they lose their claim on 'civil rights'. In armed civil conflicts, civil rights are violated on all sides. Regardless of the Western media's lurid portrayal of Gaddafi's "African mercenary forces" and its more muted approval of 'revolutionary justice' against Gaddafi supporters and government soldiers captured in the rebel strongholds, the rules of warfare should have come into play, including the protection of non-combatants-civilians (including government supporters and officials), as well as protection of Libyan prisoners of war in the areas under NATO-rebel control.

The unsubstantiated Euro-US claim of "genocide" amplified by the mass media and parroted by "left" spokespersons is contradicted by the daily reports of single and double digit deaths and injuries, resulting from urban violence on both sides, as control of cities and towns shifts between the two sides.

Truth is the first casualty of war, and especially of civil war. Both sides have resorted to monstrous fabrications of victories, casualties, monsters and victims.

Demons and angels aside, this conflict began as a civil war between two sets of Libyan elites: An established paternalistic, now burgeoning neo-liberal, autocracy with substantial popular backing versus a western imperialist financed and trained elite, backed by an amorphous group of regional, tribal and clerical chiefs, monarchists and neo-liberal professionals devoid of democratic and nationalist credentials – and lacking broad-based mass support.

Conclusion

If not to prevent genocide, grab the oil or promote democracy (via Patriot missiles), what then is the driving force behind the Euro-US imperial intervention?

A clue is in the selectivity of Western military intervention: In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Qatar and Oman ruling autocrats, allied with and backed by Euro-US imperial states go about arresting, torturing and murdering unarmed urban protestors with total impunity. In Egypt and Tunisia, the US is backing a conservative junta of self-appointed civil-military elites in order to block the profound democratic and nationalist transformation of society demanded by the protesters. The 'junta' aims to push through neo-liberal economic "reforms" through carefully-vetted pro-Western 'elected' officials. While liberal critics may accuse the West of "hypocrisy" and "double standards" in bombing Gaddafi but not the Gulf butchers, in reality the imperial rulers consistently apply the same standards in each region: They defend strategic autocratic client regimes, which have allowed imperial states to build

strategic air force and naval bases, run regional intelligence operations and set up logistical platforms for their ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as their future planned conflict with Iran. They attack Gaddafi's Libya precisely because Gaddafi had refused to actively contribute to Western military operations in Africa and the Middle East.

The key point is that while Libya allows the biggest US-European multi-nationals to plunder its oil wealth, it did not become a strategic geo-political-military asset of the empire. As we have written in many previous essays the driving force of US empire-building is military – and not economic. This is why billions of dollars of Western economic interests and contracts had been sacrificed in the setting up of sanctions against Iraq and Iran – with the costly result that the invasion and occupation of Iraq shut down most oil exploitation for over a decade.

The Washington-led assault on Libya, with the majority of air sorties and missiles strikes being carried out by the Obama regime, is part of a more general counter-attack in response to the most recent Arab popular pro-democracy movements. The West is backing the suppression of these pro-democracy movements throughout the Gulf; it finances the pro-imperial, pro-Israel junta in Egypt and it is intervening in Tunisia to ensure that any new regime is “correctly aligned”. It supports a despotic regime in Algeria as well as Israel's daily assaults on Gaza. In line with this policy, the West backs the uprising of ex-Gaddafites and right-wing monarchists, confident that the ‘liberated’ Libya will once again provide military bases for the US-European military empire-builders.

In contrast, the emerging market-driven global and regional powers have refused to support this conflict, which jeopardizes their access to oil and threatens the current large-scale oil exploration contracts signed with Gaddafi. The growing economies of Germany, China, Russia, Turkey, India and Brazil rely on exploiting new markets and natural resources all over Africa and the Middle East, while the US, Britain and France spend billions pursuing wars that de-stabilize these markets, destroy infrastructure and foment long-term wars of resistance. The growing market powers recognize that the Libyan “rebels” cannot secure a quick victory or ensure a stable environment for long-term trade and investments. The “rebels”, once in power, will be political clients of their militarist imperial mentors. Clearly, imperial military intervention on behalf of regional separatists seriously threatens these emerging market economies: The US supports ethno-religious rebels in China's Tibetan province and as well as the Uyghur separatists; Washington and London have long backed the Chechen separatists in the Russian Caucasus. India is wary of the US military support for Pakistan, which claims Kashmir. Turkey is facing Kurdish separatists who receive arms and safe haven from their US-supplied Iraqi Kurdish counterparts.

The North African precedent of an imperial invasion of Libya on behalf of its separatist clients worries the emerging market-powers. It is also an ongoing threat to the mass-based popular Arab freedom movements. And the invasion sounds the death knell for the US economy and its fragile ‘recovery’: three ongoing, endless wars will break the budget much sooner than later. Most tragic of all, the West's ‘humanitarian’ invasion has fatally undermined genuine efforts by Libya's civilian democrats, socialists and nationalists to free their country from both a dictatorship and from imperial-backed reactionaries.

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