

The Middle East Revolution: The Empire Strikes Back: Libya Attacked by the US and NATO

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No sooner had the popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia overthrown corrupt and repressive U.S.-backed dictatorships than Washington and NATO (led by a Canadian general) attacked Libya on March 19 with jet fighters and hundreds of missiles and bombs. The reason given by this coalition of the U.S., Britain, France, Italy and Canada (among others) for the attack was that they were protecting civilians from Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Considering that the U.S. has killed two million civilians in Iraq, 70,000 in Afghanistan, and about 2,000 in Pakistan, it strains credulity to believe that this was the real reason for its intervention in Libya.

In fact, if we look at the imperial records of the U.S., Britain, France, and Spain (another NATO member) and count the number of civilians they have slaughtered in the last 500 years (and continuing), we can conclude that these countries are the biggest killers of civilians in human history.

The West's bombing of Libya has already led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians and destroyed crucial civilian infrastructure such as airports, roads, seaports, and communication centers, along with military targets. The bombings have also caused economic disaster by displacing hundreds of thousands of foreign workers from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa (in an economy dependent on migrant labour) who are desperately scrambling to return home. As Professor James Petras puts it, "The current imperial warmongers leading the attack on Libya... 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."

The Western attack on Libya is motivated mainly by the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions taking those countries out of Washington's control. This created the need for a military base from which to contain those revolutions, which Libya is perfect for, since it borders both of these countries. Gaddafi has been ruling Libya as a dictator for 41 years, after overthrowing the U.S. puppet government of King Idris in 1969. Under Idris, Washington was able to set up its biggest military air base in the Middle East in Libya. Gaddafi closed the base and nationalized Libyan oil resources, ensuring that the country's people benefited from the wealth the oil generated. He redistributed this wealth widely, implementing progressive social welfare and employment policies that gave Libya the highest per capita income in Africa. He ended widespread illiteracy, made higher education free, created jobs and housing, and provided food subsidies. Under Gaddafi, Libya became the highest ranked among African countries in the United Nations Human Development Index, which assesses living conditions, life expectancy, and education.

Since 2003, however, these social gains have been eroded as Gaddafi started moving closer to the U.S., Britain, France, and Italy. Before this, Washington considered Gaddafi an enemy and had labelled him a terrorist. Blaming him for the bombing of a disco in Berlin, the U.S. bombed Gaddafi's residence in April 1986, killing Hanna, his adopted baby daughter, and 100 other people, most of them civilians. The U.S. and the U.N. had also imposed economic sanctions on Libya. In exchange for removal of these sanctions and normalized relations with the West, Gaddafi shut down Libya's nuclear weapons program, joined the U.S. "War on Terror," opened up Libya's oil sector to foreign investment, implemented regressive neoliberal reforms, and paid compensation for the bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Western companies thereupon invested in the Libyan oil sector on a huge scale, including companies from the U.S. such as Exxon Mobil, Occidental Petroleum, and Haliburton; the biggest investor was British Petroleum and also prominent were Italy's Eni Gas, Royal Dutch Shell (Britain and Holland), and Total (France).

The Bush administration enjoyed good relations with Gaddafi, as did Tony Blair, Britain's former Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian Prime Minister, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the French President. According to The Guardian (U.K.), Italy, Germany, France, and Britain were Libya's leading arms suppliers in 2009, providing Gaddafi's armed forces with military planes, guns, ammunition, tear gas, and chemical weapons. Gaddafi's relations with Sarkozy were so close that the Libyan leader's son, Saif al-Islam, announced on March 16 that Libya had financed Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign and now wanted the money back.

To further please the West, Gaddafi implemented neoliberal economic reforms, including launching a major privatization program. As one observer explained: "In September 2003, the United Nations lifted all economic sanctions against Libya, in exchange for an economic package which included plans to privatize 360 state enterprises, and in 2006 Libya even requested entry to the World Trade Organization." The neoliberal reforms also included cutting social programs and subsidies for the poor, which have increased poverty and inequality in Libya. Partly due to these regressive reforms, Libya's unemployment rate rose to 20% while the prices of rice, flour, and sugar have soared by 85% since 2008. At the same time, Libya's oil wealth was being given to foreign corporations.

Gaddafi was thus moving away from the progressive aspects of his rule and towards becoming a client of the Western countries. There was one crucial concession, however, that he was not willing to grant the West and that was making Libya a military base for the U.S., as Iraq, Bahrain, and Qatar had become. Since a military base in Libya was considered vital by Washington once the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions succeeded, Gaddafi therefore had to be removed, despite his extensive catering to the West since 2003. As another pro-Western dictator, Saddam Hussein, had earlier discovered, to maintain close relations with the West a local leader must comply with and support important Western objectives. Otherwise such an uncooperative leader can become a target for regime change.

Unlike the largely peaceful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the revolt against Gaddafi started as an armed uprising. Its disorganized participants were a mixture of Islamic fundamentalists, monarchists who supported King Idris centred in the city of Benghazi, tribal groups (Libya has about 140 tribes and clans), disaffected military officers, and neoliberal privatizers (ones even more ardent than Gaddafi himself). A few CIA agents were undoubtedly also involved in the insurrection. The rebels do not offer a progressive

alternative to Gaddafi and would probably be even more subservient to Western demands than he has been. They would certainly allow Libya to be turned into a U.S. military base. The rebels' calls for Western military intervention discredits them, as does the almost complete lack of public support from their fellow citizens.

The rebels' links to the CIA and U.S. involvement in the Libyan "uprising" have been noted by several commentators, including mainstream news sources. Discussing a March 30 New York Times article by reporters Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, Professor David Bromwich of Yale University pointed out on The Huffington Post website the next day that "One thing is clear, thanks to Mazzetti and Schmitt [who state that] 'Several weeks ago, President Obama signed a secret finding authorizing the CIA to provide arms and other support to Libyan rebels.' "The timing is interesting," Bromwich notes. "The order was signed just about the moment that President Obama was lauding the triumph of non-violence in Egypt... The upshot is this: An event that we Americans were led to believe was an autonomous rising on the model of Egypt turns out to have been deeply compromised from the start, and compromised by American meddling."

Bromwich adds that "The meaning of the Times report can be fully grasped only if one augments its findings with a March 26 McClatchy [Press] story by Chris Adams." Adams's article presents the career of Khalifa Hifter, the former chief military officer of Gaddafi's army, who has been appointed to lead the rebel Libyan army now based in Benghazi. According to Adams, after leading Gaddafi's war against Chad in the late 1980s, General Hifter retired to suburban Virginia, where he has lived for the last 20 years in Vienna (a small town) which is five minutes from CIA headquarters in Langley. So this close associate of Gaddafi's, whom U.S. officials regarded as a terrorist until eight years ago, was allowed into the U.S. two decades ago and, as Bromwich puts it, "his safe return to Libya was facilitated at a remarkably opportune moment." Bromwich concludes from this that "It seems then that a long train of earlier commitments in Libya was set in motion as soon as the Egyptian uprising began."

Manipulations Africaines, a book published by Le Monde Diplomatique in 2001, traces Hifter's CIA connection back to 1987, stating that he was then a colonel in Gaddafi's army and was captured fighting in Chad against the U.S.-backed government of Hissène Habré. Hifter defected to the Libyan National Salvation Front (LNSF), the main anti-Gaddafi group, which was CIA-backed. He organized his own militia, which stopped functioning once Habré was defeated by Idriss Déby (supported by France) in 1990.

The book adds: "The Hifter force, created and financed by the CIA in Chad, vanished into thin air with the help of the CIA shortly after the government was overthrown by Idriss Déby." The book quotes a U.S. Congressional Research Service report dated December 19, 1996, to the effect that "the U.S. government was providing financial and military aid to the LNSF, and that a number of LNSF members were relocated to the United States."

The result of such machinations are clear in Libya today. A once fairly progressive country with a relatively high standard of living and education is being destroyed by a Western coalition that has already laid waste to two other countries where it could not win wars, either (Iraq and Afghanistan). Not only are the purported "rebels" supported by the Western imperialist countries, but they are also amazingly incompetent and have proven themselves incapable of fighting Gaddafi's far more effective army, leading to a stalemate. Still disunited and disorganized to such an extent that they are not even sure who is commanding them, the rebels have failed to take advantage of the U.S. and NATO bombings

of Gaddafi's forces.

This latest disastrous failure of Western imperialism should lead to NATO's withdrawal from Libya, but instead Barack Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy, and David Cameron recently expressed their determination to overthrow Gaddafi, setting the stage for a Western ground invasion of Libya. They hope that the threat of such drastic action will make Gaddafi capitulate. But the Western leaders seem to be as incompetent as their rebel puppets on the ground. They should know that whatever happens in Libya is not going to stop or reverse the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. The people of those countries didn't have (and didn't need) military force to overthrow well-armed Western-backed regimes. These brave people are the real power in the Middle East today, and they have shown that they cannot be cowed by bombs and bullets.

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