

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



As Gaddafi falls – Lessons from Libya

**Imperialism, anti-imperialism & democratic
revolution**

Andrew Flood

Andrew Flood

As Gaddafi falls – Lessons from Libya
Imperialism, anti-imperialism & democratic revolution
August 25, 2011

Retrieved on 13th August 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

August 25, 2011

ongoing revolutions. If all three are to be succesful at some point they will have to deal with hostile imperialist intervention themselves, regardless of the alliances of necessity made in the course of this battle.

rather we have to struggle with the movements that exist. And such a struggle is unlikely to have influence if it is purely an exercise in ideological restatement that if forced to ignore the realities on the ground.

The future for the Libyan people

At this point in time who can predict which way a post Gaddafi Libya will go. Clearly the rebels are not a single body and the TNC's claim to represent all is already being challenged. Will the neo-liberal direction sketched out in the program released at the time of the London conference hold. Will the new found respect for the US cited by the Islamist's crumble when US policy returns to business as usual. Will the TNC disintegrate in a fresh civil war? Will the masses succeed in breaking through the limits both these factions would impose and start to develop the organisation to create a Libya that is truly free?

What we can be certain of seeing is a process under which the new ruling class attempts to put the lid back on working class confidence that will have risen during the rebellion. They will attempt to limit discussion of what sort of 'Free Libya' was fought for and to limit the right of workers to organise in unions and other class bodies just as we have seen happen in Egypt. In the short term the challenge will be for the working class to fight for its interests in the New Libya rather than see their interests subsumed in the name of national unity whose only outcome will be the recreation of a Libya safe for the oil corporations.

The imperialists will clearly favour the TNC and the rapid imposition of a 'business as usual' stability like that they are imposing in Tunisia and Egypt. In that respect perhaps the greatest real hope is that victory in Libya links the revolts to either side in Tunisia and Egypt and adds new hope to those

Contents

From facts to analysis to positions	6
A deal with imperialism – Lockerbie forgiven .	7
It's all about Oil?	8
Anti-imperialist armed by Imperialism?	11
Imperialist rivalry	14
China & Russia	15
Fear of an Islamist planet	16
What is the National Transition Council	17
The Islamist presence, a threat or an opportu- nity for the US?	18
Killing of Abdul Fatah Younis	20
The nature of military support	21
Military realities	23
Irish Republicanism & Gaddafi	24
The rebel need for military support	26
It wasn't a Humanitarian intervention	28
Getting beyond strawman arguments	29
The limits of Leninist anti-imperialism	31
Some anarchist perspectives	33
Cold hard realities	36
The future for the Libyan people	38

To an extent I think both Chomsky and Achcar have the right argument, even if they disagree over how it applies in the case of Libya. There can not be some sort of absolute principle that insists not one crumb of aid can ever be sought from an imperialist power. Libya was not Iraq in 2003 which saw no popular insurrection or even Afghanistan in 2001 where the US supported ethnic warlords against a common enemy.

If the Leninists were in any way honest they would recognise that in practise if not in theory that was their historical approach. Not only did Lenin accept aid from imperialist Germany during the Russian revolution but it is only by the slight of hand of pretending that the Soviet Union (or China) was not imperialist that Leninists are unable to see the reliance of Cuba, Vietnam, Korea, Nicaragua etc on imperialist aid.

An anarchist approach to these questions needs to have a number of components

1. An absolute political opposition to imperialism itself in either its military or economic forms and a rejection of the concept of humanitarian intervention from above.
2. Defense of democratic republican movements in general
3. Promotion and support for libertarian tendencies & currents within such movements
4. An acceptance that the question of how much military support it is permissible for those in struggle to accept from imperialist powers is not an absolute but rather dependent on the nature of those movements and what they are sacrificing for such support. And at the end of the day while we may advise and critique it is the movements themselves that will make these judgement calls

Such a position may be more complex, less based on ideological rigidity and more based on case by case judgement calls but it also reflects the actual rather than imagined history of the anarchist, the left and both anti-colonial and pro-democracy movements. As in other areas we cannot suspend activity until the perfect movement spontaneously emerges from the depths,

is theirs and theirs alone to make. In any case it is not as if the imperialist powers themselves are going to pay attention to what the miniscule groups of anarchists, leninists or other revolutionaries have to say anyway. It makes some sense for Castro or Chazez to come out with grand policy statements on what imperialists should not be allowed to do, Cuba or Venezuela at least have a vote at the UN.

Leninist and nationalist parties imagine that one day they will have state power, that they will get to call the shots. So again from that perspective approaching these questions on the basis of imagine state policy has some credibility. For anarchists however we never expect to be in that position so why issue statements as if we were.

Cold hard realities

Historically democratic, anti-colonial and republican movements have always sought external support in order to achieve their goals. Revolutions require money and guns and for the proletarian element within such movements both are likely to be in short supply. This in itself means internally the proletarian element will often be forced into an alliance with the more national democratic end of the business class with one providing the resources and the other the number for a successful rebellion. The historical experience of such alliances is quite negative, whether it is with the domestic business class or a foreign power. Certainly this puts enormous limitations on what can be openly fought for, when the Spanish stalinists argued that the anarchist revolution was liable to reduce the likelihood of France or Britain lifting the arms embargo during the Civil War there was a logic to their argument. But it was one the anarchists rightly rejected for reasons that are outlined elsewhere.

The sudden end of the Gaddafi regime some 6 months after the start of the Libyan revolt leaves some difficult questions unanswered for the left. Gaddafi's determination to physically crush the revolt quickly transformed it into a civil war, a civil war that saw considerable imperialist intervention on the rebel side, intervention that was essential to their eventual victory. This and Gaddafi's historic record led to some on the left taking his side in the civil war while other organisations tried to balance support for the 'Arab spring's' arrival in Libya with opposition to imperialism.

This question of where the balance lies between international solidarity with pro-democracy movements and opposition to imperialism could well rapidly return to the top of the agenda in a very much bigger way as the regime in Syria continues its months long military suppression of the democracy movement there.

The spread of the Arab democratic revolution to Libya and the subsequent intervention by imperialist airpower against Gaddafi led to a major and heated debate on the revolutionary left on the question of imperialism. The very complexity of the situation in Libya means that as well as the specifics of this war and revolution it provides a useful starting point for a re-examination of what has become traditional anti-imperialism. Libya like Rwanda, Srebrenica and more rhetorically Palestine has become one of those recent conflicts where many argue for rather than against intervention.

Part of this is down to a standard dogmatic polarization between pro-intervention liberals who think the bombs are being dropped to protect Libyans on the one hand and on the other the nationalists and hard core leninist's who think Gaddafi's past make him an enemy of imperialism today. Neither pole has much to say of relevance to those who found themselves facing Gaddafi's tanks outside Benghazi at the start of the revolt with little more than AK47's to stop them. But much more reasoned argument for and against

intervention has been made by commentators with a strong record like Gilbert Achcar who argued for intervention and Noam Chomsky who argued against.

From facts to analysis to positions

I want to look at what anarchists can say about the specifics of the Libyan situation and what the Libyan situation tells us about the politics of anti-imperialism today in general. On the specifics of Libya this means starting with looking at what we know of Gaddafi's actual relationship with the imperialist powers. We also need to ask who the rebels are, what their program is and in what way has their dependency on imperialist air power transformed them. Among other sources I've used are the cables from the US embassy in Tripoli which had been released by wikileaks. These are valuable in giving an idea of what US imperialism's actual relationship was with the regime and what they really thought about the rebellion shorn of the layers of spin embedded in every official utterance from the White House. My other sources are anarchist writings (in one case from within Libya) and the better end of the mainstream media and business press.

Those who have openly proclaimed support for Gaddafi have done so in the language of anti-imperialism. But whatever about his claim to be anti-imperialist back in the 1980's, today Gaddafi is the dictator who it was claimed had turned anti aircraft guns on democracy protesters, killing hundreds in the first days of the revolt against his rule. Footage was posted by Libyans in those early days, and the gruesome sight of bodies that had literally been ripped apart by the high calibre bullets appeared to leave no doubt of such use. As did the charred bodies of soldiers who had refused to follow such orders and as a result had been executed, hands cable tied behind their backs.

that may go down well in London it wouldn't sound so convincing when Gaddafi's tanks were on the outskirts Benghazi.

A final point worth looking at is the interview on Anarkismo.net with Nejat Firat Zeyneloglu, a Kurdish libertarian based in Turkey. Nejat made the following observation on the polar debate the old style leninist and liberal left are engaged in. *"Defending dictatorships or defending the imperialist intervention against dictators, are basically the same thing; it means to reject or to ignore the will of the masses of the people who fight for their liberty by themselves. I'd like to point out that there is on both arguments, distrust of the people, the masses, and their struggle. For the imperialist countries, naturally, the whole issue is to provide a so-called "stability", because their interests depend on the "stability". So, generally, as long as their benefits are protected, they do not care who the dominant power is; fascists, social democrats, conservatives, greens and so on. Remember that as far as a month ago, Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Erdogan and others were best pals with Gaddafi. Because all of them have investments in Libya, and as you know, investment is more important than people's life for capitalism. The imperialist countries are more worried about the Libyan people rather than Gaddafi. Therefore, the aim of this war is to establish and to guarantee a new structure in Libya that is for the benefit of the imperialist countries. I think that we must support the struggle of the Libyan people that is based on their own will. We must support all kind of practice of direct democracy and self-management against any kind of oppression or authority. We have to acknowledge that the Libyan people have the right to self-determination, and we have to side with people, not Gaddafi or the imperialists."*

Within this is the seed of a different approach. Which is that while retaining the right to advise and criticise we should start off with a defense of the popular movement and an acceptance that the decision about how to balance political opposition to imperialism with the military need for imperialist intervention

what the cost of intervention for the Libyan revolution is, a cost as we have seen that is already been paid.

Italy was closely connected with the Gaddafi regime and now provides the airport bases for the intervention. A statement from the FdCA in Italy concludes *“What we, as revolutionary activists, are interested in is the potential for revolt and self-organization being expressed by populations whose demands are no longer set by clericalists or fundamentalists, but are instead concentrated on basic rights and the re-distribution of wealth... This is why we support the popular committees and our comrades who, at the cost of their own lives and liberty, fight in the streets and squares of Benghazi, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This is why we are firmly opposed to the war and the military intervention whose inevitable result is devastation and misery in Libya, and to the cruel repression being carried out in other countries in their attempt to normalize the situation there.”*

Like the better anti-intervention statements this statement tries to both support the democratic revolution and oppose the imperialist intervention but while this is a strong political position for the reasons outlined above it is a position that is ludicrous from a military point of view. How are we to solve this particular contradiction between the formally correct political position of opposing all intervention and the military reality of a democratic revolution that would have been snuffed out, with perhaps considerable loss of life without such intervention? In his reply to Gilbert Achcar Alex Collinicos of the British SWP essentially just shrugged his shoulders and said ‘shit happens.’ His reply to Achcar concludes *“The sad fact is that massacres are a chronic feature of capitalism. The revolutionary left is, alas, too weak to stop them. Until we become stronger, we can at least offer political clarity about what’s at stake.”* This at least is considerably more honest than the Irish SWP’s assertion that the Libyan people can win on their own but while its an answer

The BBC carried an interview with a orderly at a Libyan hospital mortuary who claimed 6–700 had been killed in Tripoli alone (Source:) However a June 24th article by Patrick Cockburn cited an Amnesty International report (which I have yet managed to find online) which instead put the death toll of the initial repression of the protests at around 200 and said anti-aircraft guns had not been used as spent cartridges recovered where protesters had been killed all came from AK-47’s and similar weapons.

It may well be that it will never become clear what exactly happened during the suppression of the first protests. But regardless of the weapons used or exact numbers killed Gaddafi’s forces did shoot down demonstrators. The fact that sections of the left were willing to support Gaddafi despite this (and indeed when the higher death tolls went unchallenged) is not a new departure. In the name of anti-imperialism sections of the left have supported other and more brutal dictators in the past.

So at the start of 2011 was there any seriousness to this presentation of Gaddafi as a fighter against imperialism? I would tend to argue no, the so called anti-imperialism was a front for public consumption at home and abroad rather than a reflection of what Libya’s actual relation with the imperialist powers were pre-rebellion.

A deal with imperialism — Lockerbie forgiven

Pre-rebellion Gaddafi had managed to transform himself into the locally respectable protector of the oil corporations, even if for the imperialist powers he still had a shady past. Gaddafi was almost certainly behind the 21 December 1988 bombing of a Boeing 747–121 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie that killed all 243 passengers and 11 people on the ground. The bombing was widely seen as retaliation for

the bombing of his compound in April 1986 during which an adopted baby daughter was killed. A couple of Gaddafi's speeches during the early days of the insurrection were filmed in the ruins of the compound, no doubt intended to remind the international audience that he had stood up to and withstood imperialist assaults before. Near the start of the insurrection on 24 February 2011, in an interview with the Swedish newspaper Expressen, justice minister Mustafa Abdel-Jalil who had just resigned from the regime claimed that Gaddafi personally ordered the Lockerbie bombing.

Despite the fallout of the Lockerbie bombing the scale of the restoration of relations with Gaddafi before the rebellion was such that the British government had as far back as 2009 arranged the release of Abdel Baset who had been convicted for the bombing. Although the US government made a public show of kicking up a stink about the release the reality is that already in October 2008 President Bush had signed an *“Executive Order restoring the Libyan government’s immunity from terror-related lawsuits and dismissing all of the pending compensation cases in the US.”* Wikileaks cables make clear that the US embassy in Tripoli was well aware, in advance, of the deal being hatched between Britain and Libya to release Abdel Baset, who one cable acknowledged was *“effectively viewed as something of a folks hero in the eyes of the regime and many ordinary Libyans.”*

It’s all about Oil?

The eagerness to strike a deal with Gaddafi was because Libya has the largest oil reserves in all of Africa and is already the 12th biggest oil exporter in the world. Oil and gas account for 25% of the economy, 97% of exports and 90% of government revenue. As long as Gaddafi's power was not seriously challenged there was a need to deal with him. Both

In republican Spain in the 1930's this meant suppressing the revolutionary movement, in particular the anarchists, within the republican zone because this was a period where the Soviet Union sought an alliance with some imperial powers against others. At the end of World War Two it meant Moscow ordering the communist partisan units in countries like Greece and Italy that Stalin had signed over to the west at Yalta to suppress the demand for revolution. In Greece this involved the execution of communist cadres that refused these orders. In Yugoslavia the partisans were strong and independent enough to resist these orders and take power under Tito.

Some anarchist perspectives

Soon after the start of the air war there were a number of contributions to the debate on Libya from an anarchist perspective. I'm going to look at three made at the start of the intervention from material in English on Anarkismo.net.

The first is important as it is a translation from the blog of a Libyan anarchist Saoud Salem who on the eve of the intervention argued that *“this intervention that will transform Libya into a real hell, even more than now. That intervention will also steal the revolution from the Libyans, a revolution that has cost them thousands of dead women and men so far. An intervention that will also divide the Libyan resistance..To be liberated from Qaddafi just to become slaves to those who armed him and empowered him during all those years of authoritarian violence and repression.”*

Saoud Salem's blog gives their location as being Libya and while there is no indication that this is any more than a single critical voice it still provides a useful antidote to the pro-intervention debate that insists that all anti-Gaddafi Libyans were calling for intervention. As importantly it makes clear

some sense for the first 20 years of its existence (although it often relied on the theoretical slight of hand of insisting that Soviet Russia or China could not be considered imperialist). But any serious look as previous republican insurrections has to acknowledge that very often the revolutionaries used whatever support from imperialist powers that they could obtain.

Right back to the American Revolution it is probable that victory of that revolution was dependent on French intervention and in particular the French fleets imposition of a 'no sail zone' off the American coast that robbed the British forces of the easy mobility they had enjoyed against the American rebels. In the Irish context **every** republican insurrection looked to other imperialist powers as a counter weight to British imperialism. Before the 20th century this was France, in the twentieth century it was Germany (referred to in the 1916 proclamation as 'our gallant allies in Europe') and in the 1940's it was even Nazi Germany.

Is the decision of the Libyan rebels to demand imperialist air support really qualitatively worse than looking to Hitler for support, as the IRA did in the 1940's? Apart perhaps from Fidel few could seriously answer yes to this question. On the other side of that equation can we really fault those Spanish anarchist exiles who joined the Free French army to fight fascism and to steal weapons to conduct an armed offensive after the war against Franco's Spain. Their faith contains a strong warning of the problem of such alliances, after the war not only did the Allies leave Franco in power but they handed over lists of who had fought with them and was now suspected of seeking his overthrowal.

What became conventional leftist anti-imperialism really arose to serve the needs of Leninist Russia to shatter as far as possible the power of the other imperialist powers they faced. Within this the struggle for freedom of many republican insurrections were seen as secondary to the needs of the USSR.

Britain and the US were willing to overlook the killing of their own citizens so that their energy corporations could obtain a share of the profits ahead of those of Russia or China. Italian and French companies are the other major oil players in Libya. According to the (Libyan) National Oil Company website "*More than 50 international oil companies are present in the market.*" In May 2007 Gaddafi visited then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, during which British Petroleum (BP) signed a \$900 million exploration and production agreement with the Libyan National Oil Company.

The size of the Libyan oil reserves have encouraged some rather crude anti-imperialist writings on the intervention that suggest it is simply all about access to oil. But as the facts above suggest the reality is a good deal more complex. Gaddafi had after all already given the major oil companies access to the Libyan oil fields so there was no need for a war to gain access.

In some respects business was easier for the oil companies in Libya under Gaddafi than is some of the other oil rich states. Yet another cable makes it clear that the US embassy regarded Gaddafi as considerably less corrupt than most of the other rules in the region, reporting; "Compared to egregious pillaging of State coffers elsewhere in Africa, or the lavish spending of Gulf Arabs, the Libyans don't see much to complain about in their leader's lifestyle, as long as he does a good job of making sure other people get a piece of the pie. And when Libyans do complain, they are removed from access to financial rewards."

Further at the start of the rebellion when the identity of the rebels was unclear and their program unknown there was a danger the oil corporations might have had access withdrawn or reduced under a new democratic government eager to see a greater share of profits being used for development. The war itself seriously disrupted the flow of oil and saw significant damage to the infrastructure required to export it. But if there was clearly no need for imperialist intervention to get access to the oil the flip side is the crude pro interventionist argument that

tries to rule out any discussion of imperialist interest as being oil driven because of this existing access, the situation was a good deal more complex.

The reality is that Gaddafi's historical record meant that Libya under his rule was always going to be seen as potentially unstable. He had raised concerns in the oil industry as recently as January 2009 when he told Georgetown University students that Libya "could nationalize their oil production in view of sharply plummeting petroleum prices." But as was revealed in a wikileaks cable the US embassy in Tripoli calculated that while "Industry experts in Washington and Libya have not entirely dismissed the possibility that the GOL could nationalize its oil and gas sector.. they do not currently judge it to be a serious threat." The embassy thought that Gaddafi "may in fact be signaling more aggressive efforts by the GOL and NOC to secure greater shares of oil produced under existing contracts." The embassy concluded that "While it is never wise to rule out the possibility of seemingly irrational decisions by the GOL, we are not inclined to believe that nationalization is being seriously considered"

The bulk of Libya's proven oil and gas reserves lie in the Eastern half of the country. So if pre-rebellion the imperialist powers had to deal with Gaddafi because he had access to the oil once the rebellion was underway they increasingly had to deal with the rebels for the same reason. And as we shall see the US in particular had some serious pre-existing concerns with the opposition movement in Eastern Libya.

It would seem we can make two general comments in relation to the role of Oil in the intervention

1. There was no need for the intervention in order to gain access to the oil, over 50 international oil companies were already present. But intervention well have an impact on what conditions future access happens under, which ever way the situation unfolded.

Achar's article is weakened though by his idea that public opinion played a significant role in pushing the imperialists into intervening. Amusingly he pushes this the hardest around one of the rhetorical devices that the anti-interventionists are often heard to use, the idea of the US imposing a no-fly zone on Israel. "One can safely bet that the present intervention in Libya will prove most embarrassing for imperialist powers in the future. As those members of the US establishment who opposed their country's intervention rightly warned, the next time Israel's air force bombs one of its neighbours, whether Gaza or Lebanon, people will demand a no-fly zone. I, for one, definitely will."

The very idea of the US doing such a thing because of public pressure seems so ludicrous that it exposes the weakness of the idea that 'public opinion' played a significant role in leading to the decision to intervene. But there are two other substantial pieces of evidence against this concept. Firstly that the massive displays of anti-war public opinion, particularly in Britain, had no visible impact on the decision to invade Iraq. And secondly that opinion polls actually reveal that there were initially only narrow majorities supporting the air strikes in Libya and that in both cases there were more opposed to further military involvement than for it. Quite certainly there was no overwhelming demand for intervention by their military that pressurised the imperialist powers into acting. By the start of April a Quinnipiac University survey "found that 47 per cent of registered voters now disapprove while 41 per cent support" the US intervention.

The limits of Leninist anti-imperialism

The Libyan example in particular has exposed the limit of conventional Leninist anti-imperialism, the convention that simply looks at such struggles in terms of what is bad for imperialism. This Leninist approach might have made

terview coming down against supporting the intervention because of the record and intentions of the western powers says; *“In the case of intervention by the triumvirate of imperial powers that are currently violating UN 1973 in Libya, the burden is particularly heavy, given their horrifying records. Nonetheless, it would be too strong to hold that it can never be satisfied in principle — unless, of course, we regard nation-states in their current form as essentially holy. Preventing a likely massacre in Benghazi is no small matter, whatever one thinks of the motives.”* He doesn't think Libya meets that test but he thinks it can be met pointing *“In the post-World War II period, there are two cases of resort to force which — though not qualifying as humanitarian intervention — might legitimately be supported: India's invasion of East Pakistan in 1971, and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, in both cases, ending massive atrocities.”* It has to be noted here that Chomsky is looking at whether the imperialist intervention is humanitarian rather than whether the rebels should have looked for imperialist military support.

On the pro-side Gilbert Achcar's 'Libya: a legitimate and necessary debate from an anti-imperialist perspective' was a well argued critical look at the case for supporting the air intervention to prevent a massacre even though we know that it not the only reason why the imperialists are intervening. *“Every general rule admits of exceptions. This includes the general rule that UN-authorized military interventions by imperialist powers are purely reactionary ones, and can never achieve a humanitarian or positive purpose. Just for the sake of argument: if we could turn back the wheel of history and go back to the period immediately preceding the Rwandan genocide, would we oppose an UN-authorized Western-led military intervention deployed in order to prevent it? Of course, many would say that the intervention by imperialist/foreign forces risks making a lot of victims. But can anyone in their right mind believe that Western powers would have massacred between half a million and a million human beings in 100 days?”*

2. The imperialist powers do not have identical interests. Had Gaddafi won it is quite possible the western imperialist powers would have been 'punished' by him favoring Russian and Chinese energy companies. The victorious rebels have suggested they will not look favourably on Chinese and Russian companies for the same reason.

The early French support for the rebellion may in part be down to hoping this would see the interests of French companies being promoted over those of other NATO countries, in particular Italy. Indeed in March the Prime Minister of Turkey almost directly accused France of following such motivations when during the row about which NATO countries would have military decision making capabilities he declared *“I wish that those who only see oil, gold mines and underground treasures when they look in [Libya's] direction, would see the region through glasses of conscience from now on.”*

Likewise the late break Italy made with Gaddafi probably reflects the fact that the Italian oil corporation ENI is the current largest foreign oil company in Libya, and thus has the most to lose by any restructuring of access if the rebels won or Libya was partitioned. The wikileaks cables reveal that the other oil companies were annoyed with ENI for giving too much to the Gaddafi regime so the rebel victory is quite likely to result in losses for ENI because of the identification of ENI with the Gaddafi regime.

Anti-imperialist armed by Imperialism?

Oil is of course only part of the story of Gaddafi's improving relationships with the imperialist powers prior to the rebellion. Sanctions against Libya were lifted in 2004 allowing arms sales to resume. Both Britain and France supplied the Gaddafi regime with weapons. An EU report released just before the rebellion revealed that Britain had sold *“\$33 million worth of small arms,*

ammunition, ordinance, aviation components, armoured and protective equipment and military electronics.” The EU as a whole issued licences for the sale of weapons and weapons systems valued at pounds \$462 million to Libya in 2009. In 2007 the French company Dassault Aviation was awarded a contract to put Libya’s 12 remaining F1 Mirages back into flying condition, these were subsequently used in the attacks against protesters and rebels by the regime although 2 of the 4 repaired were flown to Malta by their pilots when they were ordered to bomb protesters.

US Huey and Chinook helicopters have also been delivered to Libya via Italy. In fact the first Tomahawk missile strikes seem to have included as targets the very expensive US military command and control facilities sold to Gaddafi to equip his elite brigades with in the last couple of years before the rebellion. No doubt afterwards the US will be keen to sell the same systems to the new regime! Right at the end of 2008 the US Embassy in Tripoli reported on the keenness of the Gaddafi regime to buy additional US military equipment.

The cable also confirms US embassies opinion as to the shallow nature of Gaddafi’s anti-imperialist posture in revealing that *“Muammar al-Qadhafi expressed reservations to Muatassim in mid-November about U.S.-Libya military-to-military cooperation that could lead to having large numbers of U.S. advisers and trainers present in Libya. He was keen that U.S. military personnel not be seen in uniform in Libya, a prospect with which he was particularly concerned given that the “evacuation” of U.S. and U.K. military bases (the Wheelus and el-Adem airbases, respectively) in 1970 was viewed as a key accomplishment of the revolution.”*

Another May 2009 cable describes a meeting between the US Africa Command General and the regime, in it is reported that *“Al-Qadhafi expressed a desire for cooperation with U.S. Africa Command in the fields of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy.”* The US embassy also clearly saw Gaddafi’s links with Daniel

sual way the imperialist military powers regard such civilians was revealed when during the recovery of two US personnel from a crashed aircraft. Aj Jazeera reported that as the Search and Rescue mission came to pick them up local civilians approached to aid the two downed airmen. *“Marines on board the Ospreys sprayed them with gunfire, injuring eight people. Hospital sources told British reporters who arrived on the scene the next day that one man might need his leg amputated. The injured included a young boy who local hospital officials say may lose his leg”.*

As many pointed out there was no western intervention in other Arab states like Bahrain where large numbers of civilian protesters were also being shot down. This made clear there was no absolute principle of protecting civilians. Even Lord Craig the head of the British armed forces during 1991 Gulf war has admitted that because of the different policy towards Bahrain “Once again we will face the accusation that oil-starved colonialists are up to their knavish tricks.”

When the Egyptian revolt broke out the US restricted itself to calls for calm for many days, right to the point where it became obvious that a continued refusal of Mubarak to step down was going to lead to major revolt and instability. Just as in South America at that point the US switched from supporting the dictatorship to steering the direction of the democratic struggle away from any fundamental threat to US interests. Thus the last favour the dictator does as he heads off stage is to be seen to be finally pushed on his way by the same White House that up to then backed him.

Getting beyond strawman arguments

It would be wrong to pretend that all those who argued for or against intervention are making shrill arguments. On the anti-intervention side Noam Chomsky, in a well considered in-

It wasn't a Humanitarian intervention

The problem is that for a large number of leftist commentators they can't acknowledge the rebel need for military aid without it seems having to also convince themselves that this means the imperialist motivations were humanitarian. It's hard to understand the need for them to make such arguments. As we have seen a significant number of rebels interviewed don't share such illusions and instead emphasise the limits they want placed on imperialist intervention precisely because they understand the imperialist armies have a nasty habit of staying around long after any limited welcome has worn off.

Whatever about the military side of the conflict politically and economically the imperialist intervention is intended not to follow the rebel agenda but that of the imperialist powers. There is no such thing as a free lunch and even if the rebels were publicly keeping up an opposition to further imperialist control in Libya in the period before the imposition of the no-fly zone we quickly saw significant concessions being given.

The imperialist powers will seek to install as compliant a regime as possible, one bargaining method they used for a long period was to refuse to supply the rebels with weapons. This put them constantly in the position of being able to decide who wins the struggle by turning on and off air strikes at will and thus putting enormous pressure on the rebel forces to create a ruling council & program that will be acceptable to the west. Those liberals who feel the need to pretend the intervention is actually being made in the interests of the people of Libya (or idiotically that somehow there would be no 'collateral damage') are as guilty of making as absurd an argument as those on the left who imagined the defeat of Gaddafi's forces as being possible without imperialist military intervention.

Whatever the language of the UN declaration it is impossible to believe that the main interest of the imperialist powers lies with Libyan civilians. Early in the intervention the ca-

Ortega and Chavez as symbolic bluster rather than a threat, writing after Ortega's 2009 visit that while "*Libya is keen to pursue symbolic alliances with anti-U.S. leaders to balance the perception that it has gone western by finalizing the U.S.-Libya claims compensation agreement*" there was no depth to this symbolism. Indeed in yet another cable in 2009 the embassy reported that Gaddafi had "*been pressing for a broad agreement on security, including a commitment to come to Libya's aid if it were attacked*" for several months and advised on how to avoid this issue as the US didn't want that level of commitment.

Although its a minor part of overall support on 11 Sep 2009 'The Telegraph' revealed that members of the SAS were training their Libyan counterparts and that this "*will further raise suspicions about exactly what has been agreed behind the scenes between Tripoli and Britain.*" Given the role of the SAS in 'shoot to kill' operations against Irish republicans this should provide food for thought to those who were inclined to support Gaddafi against the rebels.

At the start of the rebellion Amnesty International revealed that the British company NMS International Group Ltd had supplied armored crowd control vehicles "*that look identical to ones recently seen patrolling the streets of protest-hit streets in Libya.*" The imperialist powers had not only supplied him with military equipment prior to the rebellion they had also supplied him with the equipment used to attack protests with 'less lethal' force, as they had with the regimes on either side of Libya in Egypt and Tunisia.

So the arms and training the imperialist powers were supplying to Gaddafi were not simply the equipment to fight battles against his neighbors but also the equipment and training to crush domestic dissent. He certainly had a record in doing so, in 1996 more that 1200 prisoners were massacred as a riot at Abu Salim, which jailed many of Libya's political prisoners was put down. The day after the riot the prisoners were forced into the courtyards and shot down over a two hour period. It was

only after families in Benghazi had kept up protests for two years culminating in a march on the 13th anniversary of 200 that the regime acknowledged to over 900 families that their relatives had indeed been killed and offered compensation.

With the west in 2010 viewing Gaddafi as a friend who could not only be supplied with weapons prior to the rebellion but also the tools to crush protest the claim that he was an enemy of imperialism has to be seriously challenged. Nor were all the imperialist powers all that eager to intervene on the side of the rebellion initially. The uprising began on February 15th yet it was over a month later on the 17th of March before the UN authorized member states to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya . And two more days before the first actual airstrikes took place. That timeline makes no sense if we are to see the rebels as a proxy army for imperialism taking directions from Washington, Paris or elsewhere.

Imperialist rivalry

As is the case elsewhere in North Africa the imperialists are not united on the way forward. Rivalry between French and US imperialism is common across the region and this is expressed in the differing support each offered for the Libyan insurrection. France recognised the Libyan rebel leadership, the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate government on March 10th only five days after the NTC first made this claim itself. But it took the US over four months to follow the French lead, holding off until July 15th by which time it was clear Gaddafi was very unlikely to win.

France opposed the idea that the intervention should be NATO led. It was French war planes that stopped the fall of Benghazi by bombing Gaddafi's armour as it reached the outskirts of the city, without that prompt action the question of intervention might have died before it started.

do know that these countries act in their own interest. But what is the alternative?"

Even the most thoughtful of those taking the conventional Leninist line don't seem to have any answer to what the alternative might have been. Tariq Ali was reduced to wishful thinking, writing "*We will now never know how long Gaddafi's crumbling and weakened army would have held together in the face of strong opposition. The reason he lost support within his armed forces was precisely because he ordered them to shoot their own people.*" Well yes, but that could only go so far, once he had organised the majority of the forces that had remained loyal they were rapidly rolling over rebel controlled cities and when the air strikes arrived heavy armor units had already reached the outskirts of Benghazi.

The nature of modern weaponry is such that even a tiny handful of loyal military personnel can slaughter thousands in minutes. Revolution in the age of the helicopter gunship is no longer a question of huge numbers being able to face down military units. The wishful thinking approach was taken up by the Socialist Workers Party, the SWP slogan that the '*Libyan people can do it on their own*' was incorrect to the point of being absurd. With Gaddafi going on TV to call on his followers to "*cleanse Libya house by house*" of "*cockroaches... greasy rats and cats*" it would seem to be demanding rather a lot of the rebels that they refuse the military support that prevented us from finding out whether these threats were rhetorical or real.

All of which leaves the western left in a difficult position. We don't want to see future imperialist intervention gain legitimacy because of the needs of the Libyan rebels for air support if they were to have any hope of winning. We know that support for the intervention in Libya will translate into greater public support for intervention in general.

that the left should respond to the use of massacre by backing those willing to go that far. In particular given Ireland's recent history, Bloody Sunday in particular, does it make sense to simply maintain silence when faced with a dictator willing to use far worse measures against his own people?

The rebel need for military support

From a military perspective it is almost inevitable that the rebels would welcome air attacks aimed at preventing Gaddafi using the massive military advantage that air power and heavy weapons gives his forces. This is not the 1930's, the last time when you might have believed that a rag tag army without air support could take on a modern one in a war and win. And even in the 30's superior military equipments, training and supplies played a massive role in ensuring Franco's victory over the republicans in Spain. From that perspective it would have been suicidal for the rebels (and the civilian cities they held) not to demand such strikes.

Al Jazeera reported that *"Benghazi residents say they're sure the coalition air strikes saved them from a massacre. "People were on edge all day (before the strikes), like not even able to smile, being absolutely sick to our stomachs,"* said Kadura, the American who returned to Benghazi, where his large extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins lives. *"I don't think we would have stood a chance. or weeks prior to the rapid diplomatic push for a resolution at the Security Council, Libyans had been pleading for international help. Their call for foreign air strikes was loud, unqualified and came from a broad swath of society. English teachers, bankers, and Islamists who had supported the insurgency in Iraq all said they would welcome US attacks on Gaddafi's forces."* This arises not from a lack of awareness of the role of imperialism but despite it, the the same article Kadura is quoted as saying *"I'm not gonna hold the French flag and kiss it because I*

Gaddafi played on such division and those with Russia and China. Only 48 hours before the UN vote he threatened that if attacked he would transfer Libya's energy contracts to companies from Russia, India and China. Paolo Scaroni, chief executive of Italy's Eni SpA, which has the largest Libyan investments of any Western oil company and the closest relationship to the regime told the Wall Street Journal that *"Whoever is in power needs to pump oil to get revenues for his people,"* and while some companies are concerned that *"due to the supportive stances of their home governments towards the opposition,"* they might lose access to Libyan oil but that *"At least publicly, the companies have expressed confidence that they will be permitted to return to Libya."*

China & Russia

Nearly 36,000 Chinese citizens lived in Libya before the rebellion, they were extracted by China's government which made use of the opportunity to expand its sphere of military operations, they dispatched four military transport planes and a guided-missile frigate, the Xuzhou, to Libya for the extraction. After Lockerbie China never imposed sanctions on the Gaddafi regime and dozens of Chinese companies operate in Libya with trade mainly centering on oil, but there are also wide range of other businesses giving a total \$6.6bn in bilateral trade. This includes Chinese rail companies which have signed railway contracts with Libya, including that for a rail line between Tripoli and Sirte for \$1.7bn.

Russian companies have contracts in Libya worth billions and the former Russian ambassador to Libya described the Kremlin's lack of opposition to the air strikes as *"betrayal of Russia's interests."* All in all it would be a major mistake to imagine that all the imperialist powers look at Libya in the same way or have a common plan as to where they would like

to see it develop. There are very significant tensions between them.

Rather than seeking the overthrow of Gaddafi from the start it appears that at least some of the imperialist powers were concerned that the rebel forces would be less under their control than Gaddafi. Gaddafi had been co-operating at a level where they were happy to supply him with arms for almost seven years at the time of the insurrection. The rebel forces on the other hand were a largely unknown force, with the US in particular being very cautious about who they might actually be.

Fear of an Islamist planet

This fear is in part based on a study from the U.S. West Point Military Academy's 'Combating Terrorism' Center on the resistance in Iraq which claims that *"Libya contributed far more fighters per capita than any other nationality .. including Saudi Arabia"* and that *"The vast majority of Libyan fighters .. resided in the country's Northeast, particularly the coastal cities of Darnah .. and Benghazi."* These cities were the center of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion. Andrew Exum, a US counterinsurgency specialist and former Army Ranger noted in a blog posting that *"This might explain why those rebels from Libya's eastern provinces are not too excited about U.S. military intervention. It might also give some pause to those in the United States so eager to arm Libya's rebels."*

Similar worries from before the rebellion are found in the US Embassy wikileaks cables, one from 2008 warning that *"the inability of eastern Libyans to effectively challenge Qadhafi's regime, together with a concerted ideological campaign by returned Libyan fighters from earlier conflicts, have played important roles in Derna's development as a wellspring of Libyan foreign fighters in Iraq .. One Libyan interlocutor likened young*

In an example with particular relevance to the WSM éirígí whom we work alongside in the 1% Network and other struggles as a first reaction to the rebellion republished on 20 March a long rambling speech Fidel Castro which included phrases like *"Even Gaddafi's adversaries assure us that he stood out for his intelligence as a student;"* and *"the latent Libyan rebellion being promoted by Yankee intelligence."* An actual statement from éirígí on March 21st headed 'Attack on Libya – Another War for Oil' managed to avoid even mentioning the democratic revolution in Libya outside of the neutral *"éirígí supports the right of the people of Libya to determine their own future without interference from outside powers."*

Back in the 90's Gaddafi was also funding groups on the British and Irish left. Gaddafi the anti-imperialist of the 1980's whose house had been blown up one night by American jets with British aid and who had access to both substantial funds and weaponry was for obvious reasons an attractive potential ally. That would be some residual feelings of loyalty towards him is not surprising.

There would be a logic to this position if all we were witnessing in Libya was simply a civil war between two ruling factions. Why take sides in such a fight? But while the situation is complex it is clear what we are seeing is a republican democratic revolution that started with mass street protests and which only later saw the defection of significant sections of the ruling elite. The process was inspired by the democratic revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia but followed a different pattern because when faced with mass protest Gaddafi was willing to do what Mubarak and Ben Ali were or could not.

Unarmed protesters in the streets can and did fight riot police and lightly armed police and mobs with whatever weapons could be improvised in Egypt and Tunisia. Hundreds of them died doing so but they called the bluff of the regimes which fell. Gaddafi was not bluffing and you cannot defeat automatic weapons with numbers alone. Is it really the case

Irish Republicanism & Gaddafi

I'm writing from Ireland so as a starting point in understanding why some on the nationalist left have taken this position I'm also going to look at why Gaddafi had a layer of support amongst physical force nationalists in this country. This is not just a question for anarchists in Ireland as elsewhere in the colonial and post colonial world there would be similar attitudes.

When the Libyan insurrection against the Gaddafi regime started most of the Irish republican organisations were silent on it, as were their members on Facebook and similar social media. It was only when the imperialist forces, in particular Britain, started flying bombing missions against the Gaddafi regime that statements started to appear. These tended to focus on the hypocrisy of the imperialist powers and had little to say about the democratic rising against Gaddafi itself. But some of what has been written goes beyond this and takes the side of Gaddafi against the revolution. With the left internationally a number of organisations and high profile leaders like Chavez and Castro were seen to line up behind Gaddafi in his attempts to crush the rebellion.

The NATO intervention meant that Gaddafi was once again able to pose as an anti-imperialist. Once again because he had been a good friend to Irish republicanism in the 1980's, sending at least four ship loads of modern weapons to the Provisional IRA. This included almost all the supplies of the military explosive Semtex that enabled a very much more effective bombing campaign in Britain. Some considered that campaign key to forcing the British state to engage with the Irish 'Peace Process'. Even those nationalists that later broke from Sinn Fein often retained a loyalty of sorts towards Gaddafi. To them the arms he supplied offered a counter strategy to the 'Peace Process' based on launching a 'mini-Tet' offensive which they hoped would have a similar political effect in Britain as the Tet offensive had in the US.

men in Derna to Bruce Willis' character in the action picture "Die Hard", who stubbornly refused to die quietly. For them, resistance against coalition forces in Iraq is an important act of 'jihad' and a last act of defiance against the Qadhafi regime." "Many easterners feared the U.S. would not allow Qadhafi's regime to fall and therefore viewed direct confrontation with the GOL in the near-term as a fool's errand...Fighting against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq represented a way for frustrated young radicals to strike a blow against both Qadhafi and against his perceived American backers."

The rebels for their part were not exactly welcoming the imperialist powers with open arms. On the 6th of March an 8 man British mission of 7 SAS and 1 MI6 were arrested by Army units in Benghazi that had joined the rebellion. The Guardian reported that *"The mission backfired when rebel leaders in Benghazi objected to foreign interference from governments which had not yet formally recognised them as Libya's legitimate rulers."* Far from being a proxy force under the controls of one or the other imperialist powers even in the early days of the rising they looked far more like a grouping trying to influence imperialist policy rather than take direction from it.

What is the National Transition Council

The rebels are grouped together in the body known as the National Transition Council (NTC). The political and international affairs committee of the National Transition Council released a program for the revolt timed to coincide with the London summit at the end of March. It's was first published in English but when it was pointed out this was odd, as few Libyans speak English, the NTC assured that the original was debated in Arabic. In any case its appearance was clearly intended to reassure those in the US who were nervous about what the real intent of the rebels might be.

The program declared the goal to be *“building a free and democratic society and ensuring the supremacy of international humanitarian law and human rights declarations.”* And the economic section which includes *“The development of genuine economic partnerships between a strong and productive public sector, a free private sector and a supportive and effective civil society, which overstands corruption and waste”* seems certain not to frighten the oil companies. But in case there was any doubt it also proclaimed that *“The interests and rights of foreign nationals and companies will be protected.”*

The Islamist presence, a threat or an opportunity for the US?

An Economist article sees the Islamist element of the rebellion as being something of a golden opportunity for the west, describing how the Economist reporter found that on the ground in Darna *“These jihadis enthusiastically back the NATO-led bombing campaign. “A blessing,” says Sufian bin Qumu, an inmate for six years of a pen in Guantánamo Bay, who drove trucks for Osama bin Laden’s Sudanese haulage company before heading to the Afghan camps. “Excellent,” echoes Abdel Hakim al-Hisadi, a rebel commander who trained in Khost camp, Mr bin Laden’s base in Afghanistan. “It’s changed the way we look at the West. They saved our people and we have to say thanks.”*

The New York Times carried a report on a post rebellion visit to Darnah which found *“Secular figures here were adamant in endorsing the Islamists’ right to form parties and, at the Sahaba Mosque, slogans were markedly bereft of religious sentiment. “Freedom, dignity and national unity,” read one. A leaflet circulated there pronounced demands almost identical to those uttered in Egypt: a transitional government, a constitution approved by referendum, parliamentary and presidential elections*

British Special Forces but also other forces.

“The “others” in question are the small groups of former special forces operatives, many with British accents, working for private security firms who have been seen regularly by reporters in the vanguard of the rebels’ haphazard journey from Benghazi towards Tripoli. These small detachments of Caucasian males, equipped with sunglasses, 4x4 vehicles and locally acquired weaponry, do not welcome prying eyes, not least because their presence threatened to give credence to the Gaddafi regime’s claims that the rebel assault was being directed by Western fifth-columnists.”

Military realities

At an extreme this appearance has resulted in some on the left (including Irish republicans) publicly joining the calls from Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Cuban political leader Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in expressing support for Gaddafi. Fidel really went off the deep end writing that the intervention is worse than the fascist intervention in the Spanish Civil War! *“Not even the fascist leaders of Germany and Italy were so blatantly shameless regarding the Spanish Civil War unleashed in 1936, an event that maybe a lot of people have been recalling over these past days. Almost 75 years to the day have passed since then, but nothing that has happened over the last 75 centuries, or even 75 millenniums of human life on our planet can compare.”* Of course for Fidel the prospect of a democratic revolt being used as the excuse for US military intervention is terrifying in itself, leaving aside his historical connections with Gaddafi.

require close co-operation with the forces on the growing, this suggested that US Special Forces had been deployed for such purposes.

Within a couple of days of this deployment being revealed the New York Times was able to report that American officials had admitted that *“small groups of C.I.A. operatives have been working in Libya for several weeks as part of a shadow force of Westerners that the Obama administration hopes can help bleed Colonel Qaddafi’s military”* and that *“former British officials said that dozens of British special forces and MI6 intelligence officers are working inside Libya. The British operatives have been directing airstrikes by British jets and gathering intelligence about the whereabouts of Libyan government tank columns, artillery pieces and missile installations.”* This activity according to the same report was also being used for *“meeting with rebels to try to fill in gaps in understanding who their leaders are and the allegiances of the groups opposed to Colonel Qaddafi.”* All the same according to The Economist *“Admiral James Stavridis, NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe, recently told American senators that “flickers” of intelligence suggested the presence of al-Qaeda and Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shia guerrilla group, among Libya’s opposition. But he also said that its leadership appeared to be “responsible men and women.”*

The withdrawal of US military forces that began 3 April demonstrated just how unsure the US continued to be about the rebels and the long terms effects of a rebel victory. But Al Jazeera report at that time also revealed that *“some accounts describe a growing US presence on the ground. In the east, which is largely free from the regime’s control, media reports have said that American and British clandestine intelligence officers are meeting and training rebel fighters.”* The air strikes offered the US little opportunity to study and influence the rebels, these training programs allowed both. Journalists reporting from the advance on Tripoli reported on not only the presence of

and a democratic state built on pluralism, the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and guarantees of human rights and the protection of freedoms.”

A report in the Wall Street Journal at the start of April singled out a number of Islamists including once again *“Abdel Hakim al-Hasady, an influential Islamic preacher and high-school teacher who spent five years at a training camp in eastern Afghanistan [who] oversees the recruitment, training and deployment of about 300 rebel fighters from Darna”*. This time he was quoted as saying *“If we hated the Americans 100%, today it is less than 50%. They have started to redeem themselves for their past mistakes by helping us to preserve the blood of our children.”*

The New York Times also interviewed Shukri Abdel-Hamid, describing him as a cleric who had spent 10 years in prison under Gaddafi and who declared *“We want a civil state, pluralism, with freedom enshrined by law,”* he said, before echoing a sentiment heard often in Egypt and Tunisia. *“Extremism was a reaction to oppression and the violence of the state. Give us freedom and see what happens.”*

A cynic here could suggest Abdel-Hamid has a good sense of saying what might reassure western journalists but if Abdel-Hamid represents an Islamist element this appears to be a small minority, mostly confined to the East. More worrying many senior figures are defectors from the Gaddafi regime who only jumped ship once the rebellion was underway.

The first meeting of what became the NTC was chaired by former justice minister Mustafa Abdul Jalil. On 5th March Mustafa was declared the chair of the council. But the bulk appear to be the school teachers, engineers, lawyers and doctors who tend to form the leadership of republican insurrections because of their education and extensive pre existing social contacts. The NTC is completely dominated by defectors from the old ruling class and the middle class, all appear to be male

although the TNC has claimed there are a small number of women.

The Libyan working class may have fought for freedom in the streets but does not appear as yet to have a voice. A situation made worse by the fact that an estimated one third of workers in Libya were migrant workers and Gaddafi's use of some migrant workers as mercenaries will make class unity that include migrants all the more difficult. This builds on the system under the old regime where Independent trade unions were banned, legal strikes were almost impossible to organise and union membership was limited to workers of Libyan nationality.

This aside it is clear the rebels are not a single organisation but instead a rather uneasy coalition.

Killing of Abdul Fatah Younis

A demonstration of just how uneasy that coalition is was given at the end of July when rebels from one faction killed general Abdul Fatah Younis, the head of the Free Libyan Army. Abdul Fatah Younis had previously been a Major General in Gaddafi's army and the Minister of the Interior but had defected on 22 February after leading a Gaddafi relief column to Benghazi. The rebels who shot him were said to have shouted that he was responsible for the death of their father. This led on August 9th to the chair of the NTC sacking the entire 14 man cabinet!

The TNC appears to have most support in the East around Benghazi, rebel forces in the south and east are openly critical of the TNC. Even as the rebels reached Tripoli the Independent reported that *"rebel fighters in Misrata, who fought so long to defend their city, say privately that they have no intention of obeying orders from the TNC."*

The nature of military support

In the early days of the rebellion rebel spokespeople emphasized that while they needed the no fly zone to stop Gaddafi attacking them with ground attack planes and helicopters they did not want to see any imperialist troops on the ground in Libya. They also welcomed the use of air strikes against concentrations of Gaddafi's tanks and artillery. The rebel force itself was a poorly armed little more than an almost untrained hootch potch of volunteers using seized arms sprinkled with some army units that have defected. In particular given the huge distances and desert terrain of much of Libya such a force could not hope to advance against a modern army equipped with armor and artillery, one that could strike them down from a considerable distance.

Al Jazeera provided some excellent coverage from the front lines of the very mis matched battles that resulted when the rebels tried to take on Gaddafi's forces without imperialist air support. But within a day of the air attacks starting the rebels were able to stop retreating and start the process of retaking the towns they had been driven out of – until Gaddafi's forces adopted and switched from their heavy armour to civilian style vehicles that were hard for airpower to identify to target. The Guardian described how *"it has become increasingly apparent that the real issue for the rebels is a lack of discipline, experience and tactics. Even where they have had the advantage, they have been outmanoeuvred in large part because there has been no plan for attack or defence. Instead, the young rebels, full of bravado, charge forward only to turn and flee when they come under fire, often conceding ground."*

It is almost certainly no coincidence that the day the TNC released its US friendly program was the same day that US AC-130 gunships and A10 tankbusters were reported as being deployed for the first time (Tue 29 March). This was also significant because these airplanes are close air support weapons that