# War in Libya

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As I write this, it's been a little over a week since the United States and its NATO allies induced the UN to declare a "no-fly zone" over Libya. Ostensibly intended as a humanitarian gesture — specifically, to protect the Libyan people from assault by the government of Muammar el-Kadafi — the no-fly zone was really meant to protect the Libyan rebels from imminent defeat. In the early stages of the revolution, the rebels had been on the offensive, seizing control of the eastern city of Benghazi and other cities and towns (mostly in the eastern part of the country) and even threatening Kadafi's hold on Tripoli, the capital. But eventually, Kadafi managed to mobilize his forces and put the rebels on the defensive. It even looked as if Kadafi's troops were going to be able to retake Benghazi, the rebels' de facto capital. This would most likely have led to a complete rout of the untrained, poorly-armed, and poorly-led anti-Kadafi forces and a subsequent bloodbath throughout the country. It was to prevent this outcome that the US and the other member countries of NATO decided to act.

## Reprieve for the Rebels—At a Cost

The no-fly zone, under which US and NATO fighter planes can attack Libyan civilian and military targets virtually at will, seems to have succeeded in halting Kadafi's offensive and saving the rebels, at least for now. Yet, although the anti-Kadafi struggle has been rescued, this may come at considerable cost. This is because the aims of the United States and the other NATO countries may not coincide with those of the opposition forces, or at least of some factions among them.

Although it appears to have been forgotten since the election of the liberal-sounding (and Nobel Peace Prize winning) Barack Obama, the United States is still an imperialist power. It rules over an informal empire that spans the globe, guaranteeing US banks and corporations, and those of its allies, access to raw materials, markets, and investment opportunities. This empire is defended through a world-wide network of military bases, along with fleets of warships that patrol, and ultimately control, the oceans and major waterways of the world.

Of major concern to the US ruling class is, and has long been, protecting its control over the Middle East. This is primarily, although not exclusively, because of oil, upon which, as most people know, the US economy is greatly dependent. Although the majority of US oil imports come from Canada and Mexico, a significant portion also derive from the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia. To guarantee the uninterrupted flow of this "liquid gold," it is essential that the US have unimpeded access, not only to the sources of supply and to the ports in which the oil is loaded onto tankers, but also to the Suez Canal, through which the ships pass on their way from the Persian Gulf to the United States. The other side of maintaining US control over oil supplies and shipping lanes is preventing countries perceived to be current or potential enemies from gaining access to the oil.. For 40 years after World War II, this was primarily the Soviet Union and its allies, but with the collapse of Communism and the breakup of the USSR into its constituent parts, these enemies have become more diffuse. Although the Cold War is over, Russia is still one of them. Among them, too, is the theocratic regime in Iran, and other forces currently hostile to the US that are usually included under the rubric of "terrorists," some of which, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, are allied with Iran. And let's not forget al-Qaeda.

## The People—Bone in the Imperialists' Throat

Also included on the list, but rarely mentioned as such, are the vast masses of the Arab people and the other Arabic-speaking peoples of the Middle East and North Africa. These people have long resented the exploitation, domination, and control of the region by the United States, which is correctly perceived as only the latest in a long line of imperialist conquerors and hegemonic powers, such as the Ottoman Turks, the British, the French, the Italians, and the Germans. The Zionist occupation of most of Palestine (in the form of Israel) and the resultant dispossession of the Palestinians is only the most glaring of the Arab peoples' grievances. Although the United States poses as the friend, and even the protector, of the Arabs, it does not understand them and does not trust them. Despite all its well-paid experts, the US ruling class does not understand the Arab peoples' historic hostility to US imperialism, because it does not recognize that its control, its depredations, and its support of Israel are justifiably odious to any self-respecting resident of the region. It does not have a clue as to why a significant portion of the people would even consider supporting Islamic fundamentalists as a last-ditch defense against the more obnoxious accoutrements of Western culture. Above all, it does not believe that the majority of Arabs, especially the poor and oppressed, are capable of running their own affairs without the control of benevolent powers, such as the United States, or the influence of far-seeing, charismatic leaders who are, incidentally, willing to be loyal stooges of the West.

Given this visceral distrust of the masses of Arab people, the United States has long relied on local ruling elites to maintain its control over the region. And it has never been very particular about the make-up of these elites or of the governments through which they have ruled. Its main concerns are (1) that these regimes support US interests and policies, and (2) and that they are stable. Otherwise, it cares not how backward-looking these regimes are or how brutally they treat their own people. This is why US clients in the region have included formal democracies (Israel, Lebanon, and Tunisia), theocracies (Saudi Arabia), secular monarchies (Jordan), conservative military juntas (Egypt), and nationalist and ostensibly "anti-imperialist" dictators (Kadafi, Haefez and Bashir al-Assad in Syria, and Saddam Hussein, in Iraq), however problematical its relations with these latter figures may sometimes have been. In other words, although the United States claims to support the establishment of humane and democratic governments throughout the world, it has made it very clear that this goal is way down on its list of priorities, if it makes the list at all.

## US Policy Follows Imperial Interests

US foreign policy follows from its imperialist interests, as the imperialists perceive them. Thus, the government of Saudi Arabia is just as reactionary, just as brutal, and just as theocratic as the government in Iran. But since the Saudis have long been loyal clients of the US (selling it their oil, providing bases for its military forces, and supporting its policies, particularly, its defense of Israel), their crimes against their subjects are ignored, while those of Iran are regularly denounced in the US media, and the country is subjected to sanctions and threats of military intervention. Similarly, as long as the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein supported US interests, particularly by waging war on Iran shortly after the Islamic revolution in that country, one didn't hear anything about his brutality. But when he dared assert his independence from US tutelage by invading

Kuwait in 1990, he was declared to be worse than Hitler (even by the very people, such as Donald Rumsfeld, George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, who negotiated and signed the deals to supply him with money and weapons), and then Iraq was subjected to two wars that ultimately led to Saddam's ouster.

These considerations explain the policy of the Obama administration toward Libya. Colonel Muammar el-Kadafi came to power in 1969, setting up a nationalist-style military dictatorship of which the prototype was the regime of Colonel Gamal Abdel al Nasir, who came to power in Egypt through a military coup in 1952. These regimes reflected the aspirations of middle-class elements, based in the army and elsewhere, who resented their countries' total subservience to Western imperialism and sought to base themselves on popular anti-imperialist/anti-Zionist sentiment among the people. They also tried to achieve some degree of economic independence and growth by balancing between the United States and the Soviet Union in foreign policy, while pursuing statist ("socialist") economic policies at home. While Egypt eventually made its peace with the United States (and with Israel), Kadafi kept up his anti-imperialist stance for much longer, supporting radical Palestinian factions and terrorist-style activities and generally tweaking the US and its European allies whenever he could. But eventually, he, too, made his peace with the United States, the capitulation occurring in 2004, during the administration of that militant promoter of global democracy, George W. Bush. In exchange for toeing the line, Kadafi was taken off the list of international terrorist threats (the "axis of evil") and received trade deals and military aid, US military officials helping to modernize his army. This is the very army that is now attacking the Libyan people, for whom the US government never managed to express much concern in the past.

## Revolts Upset the Applecart

Ever since the uprising in Tunisia, the problem for the US in the Middle East is that the peoples of the region, tired of their political oppression and their lives of poverty and limited opportunity, are upsetting the apple cart just when it looked as if the United States was getting things reasonably well in hand. The immediate question facing the US political leadership in the current crisis is which horse to bet on: the people, whose victories are not certain and whose loyalties are not clear; or the regimes, who, it is now obvious, are sitting atop rumbling volcanoes. Making the matter more complicated is the fact that the revolutionaries, for the most part young people who have no remembrance of or loyalty to the anti-imperialist pasts of their rulers, are rebelling in the name of the very bourgeois democratic rights that the US claims to embody, while looking to the US and its European allies for support. While some of the more liberal commentators in the capitalist media have been calling for the US "to be on the side of history" and grant all-out support to the rebels, the general consensus of opinion seems to be that the US's general policy should be to play its cards close to the vest, waiting to see which way the wind will blow, searching for ways to exercise leverage over whichever party is victorious, while constantly proclaiming its support for freedom and for the democratic rights of the people. This accounts for the dilatory and mealy-mouthed nature of the Obama administration's overall policy since the onset of the popular uprisings.

As far as the situation in Libya specifically is concerned, given Kadafi's long history of creating problems for the West, and given the increasing obviousness of his regime's murderous nature,

the Obama administration now appears to want to get rid of him, while working to ensure the rebels' dependence on the US and the Europeans. Hence, the no-fly zone but no serious talk about arming the rebels.

## Mistakes of the Rebels

In this context, I believe it is a mistake for the rebels to have called for and to be applauding the implementation of the no-fly zone. Of course, the rebels have the right to call for whatever they want and to accept aid from whomever they want. But if they really hope to win the right to actually manage their own affairs, it is a serious tactical error to call for, and support, imperialist intervention, which is what the no-fly zone amounts to. This is because the imperialists cannot be trusted to support the true self-determination of the Libyan people. While today and perhaps tomorrow, the NATO powers may point their weapons at Kadafi's forces, the day after that they may decide that it is more in their interests to try to arrange a ceasefire and broker a negotiated settlement. This may well be the case if forces emerge within Kadafi's military that would be open to forcing out Kadafi and turning him over to the imperialists, in exchange for amnesty for themselves. A hidden clause to any such agreement would be to keep political and social changes in Libyan as minimal as possible. Pressure for a negotiated settlement may almost certainly arise if a radical faction were to gain any significant influence among the rebel forces.

Instead of supporting the no-fly zone, the rebels should be calling for the US, NATO, and the UN to give them weapons, including tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft weapons, with no strings attached. The rebels should militantly oppose imperialist intervention in Libya under whatever pretext it occurs, and should resolutely resist efforts on the part of outside forces to exert any kind control over their liberation struggle.

## Continue the Struggles

Given the volatile nature of the entire Middle East today, the no-fly zone in Libya and the de facto position of support to the rebels it implies pose serious problems for the imperialists. Recently, troops of the government of Bashir al-Assad in Syria opened fire on Syrians protesting the regime, killing many of them. Are the United States and the NATO countries now obligated to establish a no-fly zone over Syria? And what about the countries in which people are revolting against the repressive regimes the US considers to be close allies, such as the Saudis? Almost any way it leans, US imperialism will continue to face daunting challenges throughout the region. Already the elites are ignoring advice emanating from US ambassadors that they should refrain from killing their own people and offer concessions. Instead, they are heeding the example of Kadafi, digging in and resorting to increasingly brutal repression. Hopefully, such repression will not defeat the popular struggle but instead motivate the people to continue their struggles, to escalate their fight to overthrow the reactionary elites that have oppressed them for so long and to implement not merely mild political reforms but radical transformations of the entire economic and social systems of their countries.

**LONG LIVE THE ARAB REVOLUTION!**

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