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Libya

Bombs over Libya

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Is the military action against Libya necessary and helpful in order to stop Gaddafi's regime's onslaught on its opponents or is it an imperialist aggression driven by strategical self-interest, which only will make things worse for the Libyan people? The international left is split on this question. And the question is truly complex and cannot be answered by ready made slogans about always being opposed to imperialist aggressions or unconditional support to the rebels. A serious response must be based on a concrete assessment of the situation in Libya, and not on abstract principles or revolutionary rhetoric.

This weekend the bombs started falling over Libya, after the UN Security Council gave green light for imposing a no-fly zone.

The double standards of the West are conspicuous. How can we trust leaders who defended Mubarak till the last and who still even refuse to condemn the Bahraini kingdoms' use of lethal force against peaceful protesters in being genuinely moved by the human rights situation in Libya?

Equally, the responsibility of the West in creating the monster of Gaddafi is obvious. There have certainly been ups and downs in the relations between Tripoli and Western capitals reflected by the global power balance. But on the bottom line, it is true that Gaddafi has been supported and armed by the Western powers for decades.

Both these points make it clear that we should be extremely sceptical about the former colonial powers sudden manifestation of goodwill towards the Libyan people. But none of these points are, by themselves, arguments for opposing the no-fly zone over Libya.

Rejecting Western military intervention in Libya requires a better analysis of the risks and possible scenarios on the ground. And we do need to address some rather difficult objections – namely the fact that the leaders of the opposition forces have been calling for a no-fly zone and that we have to come with better alternatives than posting blogs of solidarity and anti-imperialism.

The fact that the leadership of the Libyan rebel forces over the last days have asked for the West to impose a no-fly zone cannot be neglected. If the left in the West does not address this, we will seem very patronising towards the people who are risking their lives in a very difficult struggle against a ruthless dictator. First of all, nobody can really assess to which extent these leaders represent a popular – and nation wide - will. Second, we should remember that it had no resonance among the rebels when the idea of a no-fly zone was expressed in the West about a month ago. At the time it seemed that the rebels were heading towards victory, and its leaders argued convincingly against a no-fly zone: a no fly zone is a military intervention and Gaddafi can certainly use this to portray his regime as the ones resisting imperialist aggression and hereby alienating the rebels, who also indicated distrust in the true intentions of the Western powers. As the pro-Gaddafi forces have gained momentum during the last 1-2 weeks, the change of position among the rebel leaders must be seen as a (perfectly understandable) sign of frustration and desperation. The initial arguments of the rebels are still convincing, even if the situation seems much more difficult today after Gaddafi forces having taken over most of the country.

It is true that opposing military intervention puts the left in a difficult position, where we seem to be unwilling to deal with real life problems, and where our principles thus prevent us from saving lives. We have to come up with better answers than vague statements and long articles about solidarity with Libya and continued anti-imperialist struggle.

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First of all, very concretely, we can and should argue for sending anti-aircraft defences and other weaponry to the rebels - so they get a better chance of confronting the Gaddafi forces, who have been armed by the West for decades. Luckily, the current interim administration in Egypt (which border is near to Benghazi) is shipping arms over the border.

Secondly, and more difficult, we have to face that what can be done from outside Libya is very limited- especially by the Western regimes, who have very little legitimacy among Arabs and who have a responsibility for the current situation by supporting and arming Gaddafi's regime. An important point is to demand our governments to stop their support for other dictatorships - to which there will be resistance and similar situations can be foreseen in the future.

Thirdly, the risks of a military intervention are very high. Once the war machine starts it does not stop easily - this can turn in to a big scale war, the foreign troops might very well bomb scores of civilians by accident and turning the population against them - giving an impetus for Gaddafi. And of course we all know that France, UK and the US are not driven by some sudden kindness - but by strategic interest in the oil rich region.

The risks of only making matters worse by a Western military intervention are high. Already on the first day of the attack, international media outlets report that citizens of Tripoli turned themselves against the attacks – and that more people rallied behind Gaddafi. There is no doubt that the colonel himself is using the attacks to represent himself as the defender of the nation against foreign 'barbaric crusaders' and thus alienating the opposition forces. This will be further strengthened the moment that Western bombs hit the wrong target and cause substantial 'collateral damage' – something that is bound to happen in the event of prolonged military actions.