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Debate: Libya, the resistance, the no-fly zone

# From the Left: Is U.S. intervention justified in Libya?

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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**SocialistWorker.org** columnist **Lance Selfa**, editor of *The Struggle for Palestine*, critiques calls to support Western military intervention in Libya from several left-wing writers.

THE WHITE House-massaged media spin portrays President Barack Obama's decision to go to war in Libya as a triumph for a triumvirate of liberals—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Ambassador Susan Rice, and Obama adviser Samantha Power—who have well-established records of advocating the use of U.S. military force for "humanitarian" purposes.

As Stewart Patrick, director of the Program on International Institutions and Global Governance at the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*:

*"The United States and its coalition partners' decision to launch Operation Odyssey Dawn to enforce a no-fly zone in Libya on March 19 was a vindication of the fragile "responsibility to protect" (RtoP) norm. The diplomatic process to build a consensus about intervention was messy, involving protracted negotiations among multiple parties, and the military outcome in Libya remains uncertain. Still, the Obama administration was correct to champion RtoP's basic principle: state sovereignty is not a license for a dictator to murder his citizens."*

It's no surprise that many of the most vocal supporters of a military action launched by a Democratic president would hail from the Democratic sector of the foreign policy establishment—and that a number of these were also critics of the ham-fisted and unilateralist strategies of the Bush administration.

But supporters of one form or another of Western military intervention extend to important figures on the left and the antiwar movement.

Gilbert Achcar, the veteran socialist and respected scholar—who has published numerous articles, interviews and books on the struggle in the Middle East, including at SocialistWorker.org—contended in an interview and a subsequent article published on ZNet:

*"Can anyone claiming to belong to the left just ignore [the Libyan] popular movement's plea for protection, even by means of imperialist bandit-cops, when the type of protection requested is not one through which control over their country could be exerted? Certainly not, by my understanding of the left."* [1]

Likewise, Middle East expert Juan Cole added his voice to the chorus in support of the UN-sponsored "no-fly zone" over Libya with an "Open Letter to the Left on Libya" on March 27. It begins:

*"As I expected, now that Qaddafi's advantage in armor and heavy weapons is being neutralized by the UN allies' air campaign, the liberation movement is regaining lost territory...I am unabashedly cheering the liberation movement on, and glad that the UNSC-authorized intervention has saved them from being crushed."*

Achcar and Cole have made the case for Western intervention in Libya, however limited, for "humanitarian" aims, and they criticize those on the left who oppose it. But their arguments ignore the context in which the attack on Qaddafi's forces took place—as well as the long and sordid record of such military actions in the past.

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The U.S. and its European allies began the year with the Qaddafi regime as an ally in the "war on terror" and Libya a fertile ground for Western investment. Until this month, they were prepared to accept Qaddafi's continued rule in Libya, even at the cost of the rebellion against him being crushed. Only when the threat to regional stability and oil supplies became alarming to the West did they act.

The excuse for intervention has been the call by Qaddafi's opponentsâ€”one call, carefully selected from among others that were rejected by the U.S. and its alliesâ€”for a no-fly zone and other military action.

But even if the intervention plays some role in Qaddafi's downfallâ€”which is by no means certainâ€”any regime that comes to power in Libya will be compromised from the start by its dependence on Western powers that aren't concerned at all about democracy and justice, but about maintaining stability and reasserting their dominance in a region that has seen two victorious revolutions against U.S.-backed dictators, and the possibility of more to come.

The history of "humanitarian intervention" by the U.S. government and European powers has produced only greater violence and more injusticeâ€”in Somalia, in Haiti, in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, in Iraqâ€”but with a seemingly progressive cover of opposition to dictators who were once supported by the West.

Achcar and Cole are wrong to disregard that history by drawing the conclusion that a U.S.-led military intervention in Libya will produce a different result this time around.

**BEFORE ADDRESSING** current arguments on the left, it might be worthwhile to recall just what "humanitarian intervention" isâ€”and how it developed as an ideological support for imperialist military action in the post-Cold War era.

The rise of "humanitarian intervention" coincided with the end of the Cold War, when the U.S., with its unparalleled military power, was seeking new justifications for its use. The George Bush Sr. administration and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Colin Powell staked out the ideological territory with Operation Restore Hope, the euphemistic title for their 1992 invasion of Somalia.

But what Bush Sr. and Powell started haltingly, liberals turned into a full-fledged case for Western intervention to prevent humanitarian disasters in a number of countriesâ€”from Somalia to Haiti to the Balkans.

With the threat of military intervention escalating into superpower confrontations removed, the U.S. felt less constrained about intervening. In Somalia, Washington invaded under the guise of feeding starving Somalians. The mission morphed quickly into a war with Somalian warlords to impose a U.S.-friendly government. In 1993, forces loyal to the Somalian president succeeded in repelling a U.S. attack and killing 18 U.S. soldiers. Within a few more months, the U.S. withdrew.

Today, the Somalia invasion, memorialized in the film *Black Hawk Down*, is remembered as a failure. But in its initial stages, the *Wall Street Journal* hailed it for restoring the U.S. military's "moral credibility." The Journal added, "There is a word for this: colonialism." The Somalia invasion provided a template for the U.S. and its European allies to justify unilateral intervention in Bosnia (to set up "safe havens") and in Kosovo (to save Kosovar Albanians from attack by the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav government led by Slobodan Milosevic).

Of course, liberal champions of humanitarian intervention don't call what they advocate "colonialism." Rather, they invent euphemisms like "the responsibility to protect," the term of choice for a Canadian government-appointed International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) that drew up procedures that the

"international community" might invoke to intervene to prevent genocide or other human rights abuses. Under these guidelines, which most world governments agreed to in 2005, a state forfeits its right to sovereign control over its territory if it commits human rights abuses against its own population.

But the experience of so-called humanitarian intervention is anything but the rosy picture its liberal architects claim for it.

During the Balkan wars of the mid-1990s, NATO established a no-fly zone over the Bosnian town of Srebrenica. That didn't prevent the massacre of thousands of civilians at the hands of the Bosnian Serb military and fascist gangs associated with it.

NATO used the tragedy of Srebrenica as justification when it launched its 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999. Ostensibly, the NATO war was aimed at protecting Kosovar civilians who faced massacre at the hands of Milosevic's forces.

Yet it was apparent at the time—and has since been verified by the research of University of Arizona professor David Gibbs—that the bombing actually prompted Serb forces to step up their massacres. And this is not to mention the hundreds—or thousands, we may never know—of Serbian and Kosovar civilians killed by NATO bombs.

More than a decade later, Kosovo exists as a ward of NATO and is home to Camp Bondsteel, a huge U.S. base whose 7,000 soldiers support the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although it declared its independence in 2008, its real government is a combination of what remains of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission to Kosovo and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo. These have presided over a massive privatization campaign that sold off formerly state-run firms to European Union investors.

Meanwhile, unemployment hovers around 40 percent while the International Monetary Fund and World Bank collect Kosovo's share of the debt it contracted as a member of the former Yugoslavia. Large swathes of infrastructure remain un-repaired since the war, and electric power supply is spotty. Government corruption is rampant. Foreign forces in charge of maintaining "security" stood by while Albanian extremists harassed and murdered ethnic Serbs. As a result, almost all Serbs who lived in Kosovo have fled to Serbia or live in a northern Kosovo enclave effectively partitioned from the rest of the province by Western troops.

This is the "success" that today's liberal interventionists want NATO to replicate in Libya.

**THIS HISTORICAL** background may mean nothing to the cruise missile liberals, whose only references to "lessons of history" aren't based on real experiences of what "humanitarian" invasion and occupation have produced.

Unfortunately, in situations like present-day Libya, the liberal hawks are being echoed by people who would normally oppose U.S. intervention in other circumstances.

Many well-intentioned people who consider themselves sympathetic to the Arab revolution see no alternative to the Western attack on Libya, on the grounds that "something had to be done" to prevent Qaddafi and his loyalists from murdering oppositionists in Benghazi. This is the hook on which people who would normally be skeptical of intervention are pulled into support for the action.

Pro-intervention liberals accuse those who oppose Western military action of indifference to mass slaughter or to the fate of the Arab revolution. Writing in the *New Republic*, John Judis asked how would opponents of Western

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intervention react to slaughter and the short-circuiting of the Arab revolution: "If you answer "Who cares?"...I have no counter-arguments to offer, but if you worry about two or three of these prospects, then I think you have to reconsider whether Barack Obama did the right thing in lending American support to this intervention."

Besides being a caricature of the left's anti-intervention position, Judis' contention that intervention in Libya will stop massacres and aid the Arab revolution isn't even true. Against those who argued that failure to act against Qaddafi "would send a devastating message to other Arab dictators: Use enough military force, and you will keep your job," the long-time Middle East analyst Phyllis Bennis, pointed out:

*"Instead, it turns out that just the opposite may be the result: It was after the UN passed its no-fly zone and use-of-force resolution, and just as U.S., British, French and other warplanes and warships launched their attacks against Libya, that other Arab regimes escalated their crackdown on their own democratic movements."*

Bennis rightly captures the hypocrisy of supposed U.S. concern with democracy and human rights in Libya while it abets the repression of the opposition by its allies in Bahrain and Yemen.

But Judis' insinuation that those who oppose Western intervention are indifferent to the fate of the Arab masses has other supporters.

For example, the Israeli peace activist Uri Avneri, likening the situation in Libya to allied indifference to the Nazi Holocaust or Western enforcement of an arms embargo against the Republicans in the 1930s Spanish Civil War, fully endorsed the Libyan intervention. "[I]n order to prevent genocide, I am ready to make a pact even with the devil."

Avneri's position has no qualification. Except for references to the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s, it's hard to see what's "left" about it.

By contrast, Gilbert Achcar makes a more serious case for the no-fly zone as "a legitimate and necessary" position "for those who share an anti-imperialist position." In his article on ZNet, he writes:

*"No real progressive could just ignore the [Libyan] uprising's request for protection—unless, as is too frequent among the Western left, they just ignore the circumstances and the imminent threat of mass slaughter, paying attention to the whole situation only once their own government got involved, thus setting off their (normally healthy, I should add) reflex of opposing the involvement."*

Achcar's qualified support for the no-fly zone rests on positions that separate him from Avneri and liberal supporters of the intervention: First, that the Libyan opposition requested the no-fly zone; and second, that the UN resolution should be criticized. "Does it mean," Achcar writes, "that we had and have to support UNSC resolution 1973? Not at all. This was a very bad and dangerous resolution, precisely because it didn't define enough safeguards against transgressing the mandate of protecting the Libyan civilians."

So do the demands of the Libyan opposition, or sections of it, justify support on the left for the no-fly zone? As Gary Younge wrote in the *Nation*, "Those who are resisting Qaddafi deserve our support. But they don't single-handedly determine the nature of it. Solidarity is not a process by which you unquestioningly forfeit responsibility for your own actions to another; it involves an assessment of what is prudent and what is possible."

**AS THIS** publication has always maintained, Muammar el-Qaddafi is a brutal dictator who deserves to be deposed. In fact, until recently, Qaddafi was a friend to the U.S. and Europe, an ally in the "war on terror" and a client for

Western military aid. There is nothing "progressive" about the Qaddafi dictatorship.

However, while standing in solidarity with the resistance to Qaddafi and hoping that it will succeed in establishing a post-Qaddafi democratic regime, we also recognize that it is composed of heterogeneous elements, including genuine opponents of dictatorship and imperialism, as well as former Qaddafi regime members who would happily welcome the West's meddling in Libyan affairs.

So any evaluation of the call for the no-fly zone from the Libyan opposition has to take this into account. Even if we assume, as Achcar does, that all of the Libyan opposition is skeptical of imperialism's designs and will guard against them, we know from history that imperialism will do what it can to corrupt it—and will almost certainly succeed with at least sections of it.

The international left has a responsibility to consider whether Western intervention in Libya will actually strengthen the hand of imperialism in the region. This certainly wouldn't aid the Arab revolution.

Both Achcar and Cole proceed from the assumption that a Western no-fly zone was the only option available for the Libyan opposition. But they should recognize that the interplay between imperialism and the Arab revolution constrains what choices are on offer.

Reportedly, the Libyan National Transition Council appealed to European governments with a list of demands, including the handing over of sequestered Qaddafi funds to the rebel government. The European governments chose to ignore most of the demands, but to accept the proposal for a no-fly zone.

In other words, the notion that "there was no other choice" but a no-fly zone already accepts a compromise of the Libyan movement's independence. In the coming weeks, we may learn if the West extracted other concessions from the Libyan opposition in exchange for support for its action—for example, honoring the Qaddafi government's debts or giving preferential oil contracts to particular Western interests.

As SocialistWorker.org has argued, Western intervention has many other motivations besides the "humanitarian" claims in support of Resolution 1973: preserving the flow of Libyan oil; preventing mass migrations of Libyans to Europe; getting rid of a "failed state" in Libya; and stopping the Arab revolution from overthrowing another dictator through its own efforts.

But even for those who accept the humanitarian pretexts for intervention, accepting the no-fly zone cedes the initiative from the Libyan opposition or solidarity activists to NATO and the Pentagon.

Achcar notes that, unlike the Kosovar opposition in 1999, the Libyan opposition has opposed the introduction of foreign troops on Libyan soil. The UN resolution bars this as well. But Bennis, an expert on the United Nations, warns: "What you ask for ain't always what you get." As she writes:

*"[W]hat they got was probably way more than even the Libyan opposition itself anticipated. And despite the exultation over the first downed tanks, questions loom. What if some kind of stalemate leaves Libya divided and military attacks continuing? What if the opposition realizes that negotiations (perhaps under the auspices of newly democratizing Egypt and Tunisia) are urgently needed, but cannot be convened because the U.S. and French presidents have announced that the Libyan leader has no legitimacy and cannot be trusted?"*

What then, indeed? Nevertheless, according to Cole, "Assuming that NATO's UN-authorized mission in Libya really

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is limited (it is hoping for 90 days), and that a foreign military occupation is avoided, the intervention is probably a good thing on the whole."

But these are huge assumptions to make, as Cole, a trenchant critic of the U.S. disaster in Iraq, should know.

Bennis notes that Resolution 1973 requires continuous updates to the Security Council—lending credence to the idea that the UN is "preparing for another long war." In that eventuality, Achcar's worry that Western militaries will be "transgressing the mandate of protecting the Libyan civilians" is almost guaranteed to become a reality.

The British socialist and antiwar activist Mike Marqusee draws out the endgame:

*"The current intervention ensures that if Qaddafi falls, his replacement will be chosen by the West. The new regime will be born dependent on the Western powers, which will direct its economic and foreign policies accordingly. The liberal interventionists will say that's not what they want, but their policy makes it inevitable."*

In the pressure to respond to events, the left does itself no favors if it helps to set in motion a chain of events that could end up producing the opposite of what we all want: an end to the Qaddafi dictatorship, a free Libya and self-determination for the peoples of the Middle East.

That's why, however unpopular a position it appears to be today, the left is right to oppose the UN no-fly zone over Libya and the Western military intervention.

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[1] See on ESSF: [article 20743](#) and [article 20819](#)