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Debate: Libya

Should the left back intervention in Libya?

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

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Western intervention in Libya has caused some divisions on the genuine left. This isn't surprising. If we look at the Arab world, a combination of the widespread loathing of Muammar Gaddafi and support for the revolutions has limited opposition to the use of Western firepower against his forces.

The most intelligent case for supporting the intervention has been made by my old friend Gilbert Achcar. A consistent opponent of Western imperialism, Gilbert argues that this is an occasion when anti-imperialists should be willing to make compromises. [[Gilbert Achcar, "A Legitimate and Necessary Debate from an Anti-Imperialist Perspective"](#)]

Gilbert is right, revolutionaries have sometimes been prepared to take help from imperialist powers.

Soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917, invading German armies were threatening the survival of the infant Soviet republic. Britain and France offered help. Lenin wrote to the Bolshevik central committee: "Please add my vote in favour of taking potatoes and weapons from the Anglo-French imperialist robbers." [1]

Gilbert is also right to dismiss claims by some on the left that Gaddafi is in some way a "progressive" and that the leadership of the revolution in Benghazi support Al Qaida. He asks, "Can anyone claiming to belong to the left just ignore a 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?"

This is where I begin to get queasy, particularly when Gilbert also contends that the US, France and Britain intervened under pressure of public opinion to prevent a massacre in Benghazi.

Compare the comments of the right wing French "philosopher" Bernard Henri-Lévy.

He boasted in last Sunday's Observer about his role in persuading French president Sarkozy to push for Western intervention: "What is important in this affair is that the *devoir d'ingérence* [the right to violate the sovereignty of a country if human rights are being excessively violated] has been recognised." [2]

Championed

For "BHL", as he's known in France, what counts is the politics of the intervention. He sees it as an opportunity after the Iraq disaster to rebuild support for the idea, championed by Tony Blair, that Western powers have the right to attack states they deem to have broken their rules.

But this isn't the most important reason for the intervention, at least as far as the US is concerned.

Gilbert demolishes the argument that Gaddafi wouldn't have continued to allow Western companies access to Libya's oil. I agree—oil isn't the main issue. The US is rushing to get in front of the Arab revolutionary wave that threatens to sweep away its system of domination.

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A White House adviser told the Financial Times, "The place where we have the least interest in the Middle East is Libya..." Nodding to the island kingdom that is home to the US Fifth Fleet and risks becoming caught up in a tug of war between oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Iran, he adds, "The place where we have the greatest interest is Bahrain." [3]

The clampdown in Bahrain, orchestrated by Saudi troops, represents an effort by the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf autocracies to turn back the revolutionary tide. Barack Obama and his administration have strongly criticised the repression there and in Yemen.

They hope to use the revolutions to restructure Arab societies along more stable neoliberal lines. Taking on Gaddafi is a way for the US to associate itself with the revolutions and to shape their politics.

BHL describes addressing a meeting of revolutionaries in Benghazi and persuading them to appeal for Western support. No doubt he's bragging, but the anecdote illustrates the immense efforts under way to incorporate the revolutions.

There is the final argument, used by both Gilbert and BHL, that intervention prevented a massacre in Benghazi. 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.

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[1] The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution: Central Committee Minutes of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) August 1917-February 1918 (London, 1974), p. 215

[2] K Willsher, "Libya: Bernard-Henri Lévy Dismisses Criticism for Leading France to Conflict", [Observer, 27 March 2011](#)

[3] Richard McGregor and Daniel Dombey, "Foreign Policy: A Reticent America", [Financial Times, 23 March 2011](#)