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Libya/NFZ

Imperialist intervention in Libya and the Left

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

Publication date: Sunday 24 July 2011

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The Arab revolution continued with the fall of the third hated dictator, Saleh in Yemen, after months of bloody repression. In Bahrain and Syria, the regimes continue their efforts to stifle the popular resistance in blood. In Tunisia and Egypt, the ruling elites attempt to impose a “normalization” of their state and the exploitative system. The rebellion against the Gaddafi regime, which was until recently completely pro-Western, took a particularly tragic turn. The revolt itself was justified from the beginning and backed by the same layers – the laboring classes and youth – as in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries. Therefore the international labor movement and especially the internationalist left had to side with the insurgents despite the heterogeneity of the political forces involved and the relative weakness of the independent labor movement in Libya. The rebels managed to control Benghazi and the eastern part of the country, while Gaddafi prevailed in Tripoli and in western Libya. His troops proved clearly superior to the rebels in March, even threatening to invade Benghazi itself. Only the military intervention of the U.S., France, and Great Britain stopped the advance of the regime's forces and prevented the military defeat of the insurgents.

Since then the country has fallen into a state of a protracted civil war, with daily bombings of western Libya. Obama's pretext originally was some kind of “humanitarian aid” and “protecting the civilian population” though it was obvious from the beginning that the real intention of the West was “regime change.” This latter goal was soon adopted by NATO as a whole. In late May the NATO attacks intensified and confirmed that the two sides of the war were the Tripoli regime vs NATO in alliance with insurgent forces which play an auxiliary role. It is undisputed that only NATO forces can deal a decisive blow to the regime of Gaddafi. Right from the start, Western advisers, CIA agents and other Western intelligence services were involved in the fighting. The latest development is that the French will probably use attack helicopters. This increases the possibility that NATO will use ground forces. Thus the civil war has turned into something more like a “normal” imperialist military intervention.

The motives of the U.S. intervention

On March 28 Obama spoke about the causes and goals of the American intervention. Referring to an invasion of Benghazi by Gaddafi he said that it was “not in our national interest to let that happen.” Comrade G. Achcar, an excellent expert in Arab countries, explains: “The key point here was neither ‘values’ nor ‘conscience’ as such, but the fact that the “stained conscience” of the Western powers, had they remained inactive, would have compelled them to embargo Libya at a time when the oil market was so stressed that this would have driven oil prices to a still higher level than their already high level prior to the Libyan crisis, with calamitous consequences for the global economy.” [\[1\]](#)

As U.S. President Eisenhower stated in the 50s, the Middle East is “the most strategically important region of the world because of its incomparable energy reserves” U.S. administration policy since the years of World War II has been that the U.S. should maintain an “unquestionable authority” and its “military and economic dominance” in this crucial area. But in the case of Libya one could add the interest of Western forces to retake the political initiative, which they had lost with the first great successes of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolution and the spreading of the revolutionary flame in most of the Arab countries. Even after the heavy political defeat in Vietnam in 1975, American imperialism had still managed in the 1980s to appear as a “global actor for democracy” against “communism” and to regain ideological hegemony on a global scale. Today it is clear that the Obama administration supports the darkest and most reactionary forces in the Middle East and North Africa with its still-powerful military along with its economic/diplomatic clout. It does so not only by continuing wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also

by supporting the dictatorships in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, along with Jordan as well as the racist Zionist leadership of Israel.

The NATO leadership intervention and the Benghazi

The military intervention under the U.S. leadership was agreed with Saudi Arabia in March. The essence of the alliance was explained by analyst Pepe Escobar who noted in early April: "You invade Bahrain. We take out Gaddafi in Libya. Thus, in the beginning there was the great 2011 Arab revolt. Then, inexorably, came the US-Saudi counter-revolution. (...) The NATO show will include air and missiles strikes; a naval blockade of Libya; and shady, unspecified ground operations to help the "rebels". Hardcore helicopters gunship raids a la AfPak - with attached "collateral damage" - should be expected. (...) The objective is possibly to extract political and economic concessions from the defector and the Libyan exile-infested "Interim National Council" (or "National Transition Council" NTC) in Benghazi - a dodgy cast of characters including former Justice Minister Mustafa Abdel Jalil, US-educated former secretary of planning Mahmoud Jibril, and former Virginia resident, new "military commander" and CIA asset Kalipha Hifter. The laudable indigenous February 17 youth movement which was at the forefront of the Benghazi uprising, has been completely sidelined. (...) Gaddafi's Libya must be taken out so that the Mediterranean, the mare nostrum of ancient Rome, becomes a NATO lake. Moreover, two members of NATO's of Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, are now fighting alongside Africom/NATO for the first time. [2]

When Catherine Ashton, an EU representative, recently visited Benghazi, NTC president M. A. Jalil assured the U.S. and the EU that "those who helped us will not regret it" and added: "Our friends, who support this revolution, will get the best opportunities for future trade relations with Libya." This is a strange transformation of the revolutionary idea. External support for the "insurgency" is being bought by the sell-out of national wealth and, in effect, of national independence ... [Verrat als Vision (The betrayal as vision), Junge Welt (German left newspaper), 24/5/2011]

For the Western governments, the military intervention in Libya is only one part of a strategy that seeks desperately to escape from the increasingly terrifying capitalist crisis since the debt the U.S. has already surpassed \$14 trillion and the euro zone is on the verge of collapse ... The acquisition of full control over the Middle East and Africa is crucial for maintaining the global system of exploitation.

In this situation, the most central demands of the Libyan resistance and of the international solidarity movement with the struggle of the workers, youth, the women and the oppressed blacks should be: "Immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from the region of Libya, North Africa and the Middle East! Close all U.S. bases in Europe, Africa and everywhere in the world! Tens of billions of dollars compensation for all countries that have been victims of U.S. and NATO aggression in Africa and the Middle East!" This does not in any way mean that the struggle to overthrow Gaddafi must come to an end. However, the self-appointed Benghazi NTC betrays the struggle to the benefit of the imperialist powers and represents absolutely no alternative. It deserves no political or military support. The currently very difficult, and yet only realistic, prospect is the reconstruction of the resistance from below, gathering the workers and all the oppressed to prevent an imperialist invasion and to overthrow the regime in Tripoli as well as the Benghazi leadership by revolutionary means.

The debate within the Left

The imperialist intervention in Libya has caused serious problems within the Western Left. One side of the reformist Left was in favor of "humanitarian" military intervention in March. L. Bisky, former president of the German "Left

Party" and other deputies representing the "European Left" in the European Parliament voted for the UN's decision to install a no-fly zone, which marked the start of the bombing. But the internationalist Left also had severe difficulties trying to assess the situation from the perspective of the struggles of the oppressed. The 4th International and its sections kept a consistent anti-imperialist stance against the intervention of the imperialist states. In Denmark, however, leading members of the internationalist wing of the left party "Single List" voted for the no-fly zone, and thus for the intervention.

Mainly some articles by comrade Achcar, published on the important site *ZNet*, influenced the international debate and justified the imperialist intervention for the "salvation of Benghazi" from imminent carnage after a possible invasion by Gaddafi's troops. According to comrade Achcar, "it was wrong for any forces on the left to oppose the idea of a no-fly zone and the initial pounding of Gaddafi's armor in the absence of any alternative to avoid the foretold large-scale massacre in Libya." The same article of comrade Achcar, written on 31 March, concludes: "Now that the no-fly zone has been implemented in NATO's typical heavy-handed manner and that Gaddafi forces' ability to threaten civilian concentrations with a large-scale massacre has been severely weakened, we should concentrate our campaign on two main inseparable demands addressed to the NATO-led coalition: Stop the bombing! Deliver arms to the insurgents!"

Regarding the debate in the international anti-imperialist movement on the relationship between the self-appointed NTC leadership of the rebels and the Western governments, comrade Achcar notes: "Those who believe that the U.S. could impose a 'Karzai' on Libya by means of air power alone still have to show us how this could happen. (...) Pointing to a few individuals of various and contradictory political identities who are playing, or trying to play, some role in the Libyan uprising does not tell us what influence they really command, and cannot be convincing as an indication of the shape of a post-Gaddafi Libya, all the less so given that the National Transition Council (NTC) put forward a clear program of democratic change calling for free and fair elections. The smear campaign against the Libyan uprising is equivalent to that of those who tried to discredit the Egyptian uprising either by pointing to the Muslim Brotherhood's role or by describing Mohamed ElBaradei as a stooge of imperialism and the April 6th Youth movement as a US-trained operation. And whatever statements this or that member of the Council might give to Western media in order to please the governments that are helping the uprising is secondary compared to the fact that the downfall of Gaddafi will make it possible for a left to emerge in Libya for the first time in more than four decades." This is the basic argumentation of comrade Achcar.

Contradictions in the argumentation of comrade Achcar

Although the risk of a massacre in Benghazi was real, from the beginning the NATO states aimed at "regime change" in order to establish a new "democratic" regime, which would be even more dependent on the Western leaderships than Gaddafi's. Comrade Achcar completely ignores the reality that true democracy in a country like Libya presupposes full independence from the direct or indirect domination of imperialism and the multinationals. And we should add that it is probably an illusion on the part of comrade Achcar if he believes that the "assistance" of the West to the rebellion will lead to the establishment of a true democracy, along with the creation of an independent labor movement. Comrade Achcar also ignores the fact that the western intervention in Libya attempts to seize the political and ideological initiative, not in order to support but to oppose the entire Arab revolution. The very close alliance with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates is revealing but seemingly does not move the media and "public opinion" of the West very much. The always-monotone and criminal methods of military intervention by the U.S. and NATO, with their constant bombing since 1990, along with the almost unconcealed neo-colonial intentions of the West demonstrate the counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic nature of the intervention, even if, as in the present case, directed against a brutal dictator.

Hence the political assessment of the Benghazi NTC by comrade Achcar goes in the wrong direction. It is good that the NTC has the intention to hold free elections, but it is equally clear that this is not sufficient for the creation of truly democratic conditions. It is a bit surprising that comrade Achcar separates the issue of parliamentary democracy radically from the social realities and "postpones" the creation of the Left (or of the labor movement) to another, "future" stage of development. Thus, the relationship between the uprising and democracy is being distorted. The rebellion could lead to the self-organization of the insurgents, the workers, youth, women and of the black immigrants. In this manner it could pave the way for the development of organs of dual power "as happened, to some extent, in Tunisia and Egypt. True democracy in all these insurgent countries can be created if the revolutionary process leads to the anti-capitalist, socialist overthrow, if it turns to permanent revolution.

Comrade Achcar formulated his demands "Stop the bombing! Deliver arms to the insurgents!" on March 31. Since then more than two months have passed. NATO intensifies the bombing and probably prepares itself to send in ground troops. It appears that the NTC representatives would be grateful for that. The logic of the "salvation of Benghazi" remains valid and works in favor of the imperialist intervention. Without the bombing, Gaddafi's troops could get the upper hand again. So the NATO military intervention still seems to be "legitimate." At this point comrade Achcar's entire "and, one could say, quite artificial" argumentation proves self-contradictory and ultimately untenable. Either we are in principle against the military intervention of the West "and then comrade Achcar is wrong" or we follow the logic of "protection of the civilian population" and support the "cooperation" of the insurgents with NATO, which inevitably leads to the subordination of the NTC and the uprising to the Western leaderships.

Another argument of comrade Achcar refers to the attitude of Lenin on the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers (imperialist Germany and Austria-Hungary) and Soviet Russia in 1918. Lenin argued that the Peace Treaty, by which the new Soviet power temporarily ceded vast territories "the Baltic countries and Ukraine" to Germany "was indeed a compromise with the imperialists, but it was a compromise that had to be made under the circumstances." The comparison between Soviet Russia and Libya today is not very persuasive. The Benghazi NTC has little similarity to the Russian revolutionary leadership of 1918. Moreover, in the case of Brest-Litovsk the German imperialists obviously did not come to "help" the revolutionary power but to dissolve it. The Peace of Brest-Litovsk was merely a necessary retreat of Soviet Russia in order to buy time to restructure its forces. Overall, the approach of comrade Achcar cannot be regarded as having outlined a successful strategy for the Libyan revolution or for the struggle for genuine democracy and socialism.

*This is a translation of an article from the June 2011 issue of the Greek review **Spartakos**.*

[1] [Gilbert Achcar: B. Obama's Libya Speech and the Tasks of Anti-Imperialists.](#)

[2] Pepe Escobar: The US - Saudi Libya Deal, Asia Times, 3/4/2011