

## **In Support of the Libyan Rebels and the No Fly Zone**

The question of Western intervention in Libya is not immune from considerations of geopolitical power. The attack on Gaddafi's forces has only been possible due to his lack of relative power in the global arena, and because Libya and its regime do not hold a privileged position in the American imperium. The very structure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) means that, as displayed in Iraq, it does not intervene to protect civilians from imperial aggression. Thus can progressives and anti-imperialists still support the UN-mandated intervention in Libya? They can, and indeed, they must.

The uprising in Libya is a popular one, united by a program of democratic change. Many estimate that Gaddafi had lost control of upwards of 80 percent of Libyan territory and most major population centres before he struck back, massacring hundreds of peaceful protesters, including with aircraft and tanks. It has largely been an exercise of naked military power that allowed him to shut the lid on the Libyan protest movement and push back armed rebels. In the process, Gaddafi's forces killed anywhere between 2000 and 10,000 people. Thus, it is not surprising that the rebels themselves called for the imposition of a No Fly Zone (NFZ).

On the eve of the passage of UNSC Resolution 1973 that authorized setting up an NFZ and "all necessary measures...to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack..." Gaddafi's forces were massed outside the rebel capital of Benghazi, while his air force bombed the city. Without doubt, a massacre would have followed had Gaddafi sacked the city. Gaddafi had vowed that his forces would go "house to house" tracking down rebels. He also referred to the residents of Benghazi as "rats and vermin," reminiscent of the ritual dehumanization that precedes mass exterminations, as was most recently witnessed in Rwanda. There is little doubt that he would have made good on his word.

Thus the Western bombing campaign, including attacks on Gaddafi's armour and artillery, prevented a massacre on a terrible scale. To oppose it is to accept mass killing in Benghazi, Tobruk and other rebel held towns as an acceptable moral price for impeccable self-righteousness. Even with the UNSC Resolution, the evidence of Gaddafi's brutality is mounting daily; an NFZ is unable to prevent paramilitaries hunting down rebel sympathizers in the towns held by Gaddafi loyalists. Many have been jailed or executed. The case of Iman al-Obeidi, the young woman who was gang-raped by government thugs and then held in Gaddafi's Tripoli compound, is a stark reminder of the unique vulnerability and suffering of women (and, of course, children) caught in such situations.

Of course, the dangers faced by Libyans are not historically unique. Many have rightly pointed out that the UNSC has consistently failed to act to stem massacres on a much greater scale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or previously in Rwanda. But if this is to be fair criticism, it must contain the tacit acknowledgement that there are situations where imperial intervention may serve a positive purpose and be the lesser evil. Given Gaddafi's butchery, one must assume that Libya is one – even if not the only – such situation.

## **Arguments Against the NFZ**

Though some well-meaning arguments have been put forward against an NFZ, there are few visible alternatives to one. Some have raised that an Arab intervention would have been more acceptable. This borders on an Orientalist view of Arabs as an undifferentiated mass that would somehow view troops from another Arab country as less foreign, and devoid of imperial manipulation or motives, or of particular national identities and interests. It also ignores ground realities in the Arab world, such as Egypt's history of intervention in Libya. Moreover, Arab armies would likely cause just as many, if not more, civilian casualties. In any case, the discussion is purely academic. Arab air forces do not have the capacity or command-and-control capability to enforce an NFZ, and there is no stomach, least of all within Libya, for foreign expeditionary forces on the ground.

Others have argued that the Libyan rebels should be armed instead and left to their own devices as far as possible. This is certainly a worthy longer-term goal and priority. The more the rebels are able to consolidate territorial gains and sustain their own military operations, the less dependent they will have to be on outside intervention. But this is not yet an alternative to Resolution 1973. Even had there been willing suppliers, getting adequate quantities of heavy weapons into Benghazi on short notice would have been logistically impossible. Moreover, using sophisticated anti-air defense systems, much less rolling a tank or handling artillery, is not as simple as driving a pick-up truck tricked out with a machinegun. It requires weeks, even months, of training to gain any kind of proficiency. Surely Gaddafi's forces would not have stood by idly while the rebels passed through boot camp.

Some in the West have also argued that their countries simply can not afford the cost of this intervention. Though such statements are sometimes made with laudable intentions of diverting resources to worthy causes and communities in need domestically, it makes many in the Global South cringe. The interveners in Libya are among the richest nations in the world, despite a global economic downturn. Surely they are best placed to absorb the economic burden. Further, if intervention is morally imperative, then the economic price is one worth paying. To provide an extreme illustration, could anyone have argued against intervention to prevent genocide in Rwanda because of financial onerousness?

Internationalism, not isolationism, needs to inform a progressive position on Libya. There was an overriding need to protect civilians and rebels in Benghazi, and indications so far are that the intervention will be far less costly in terms of lives, particularly if the countries enforcing the NFZ are pressured to keep their intervention to the minimum extent necessary. Had Gaddafi massacred the rebels in Benghazi and crushed their nascent movement, he would have provided a template for other beleaguered Arab dictators, demonstrating that the best way to deal with popular movements is by resorting to maximum force. The lifeline thrown to the rebels has resonated with and reinvigorated protest movements across the region.

## **Restraining Imperial Power**

Yet this view in support of the Libyan opposition is not an argument for giving intervening countries *carte blanche* in conducting their operations. There remains a burning need to monitor civilian casualties, compliance with Resolution 1973 in line with humanitarian and opposition needs, and “mission creep,” particularly the involvement of foreign ground troops. Smaller search and rescue parties are – and have historically been – an inevitable part of enforcing an NFZ. But the deployment of a large ground force also remains a clear and present danger. Resolution 1973, on the insistence of the rebels, does explicitly rule out “an occupation force.” However, under international law, there is a distinction between fighting a war on foreign soil and an occupation. Under the Hague Conventions, and specifically under Article 42 of the Laws and Conventions of War on Land (Hague II) of 1899, “Territory is only considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation applies only to the territory where such authority is established, and in a position to assert itself.” Between a ground invasion and an occupation, there is a vast and murky grey area. Thus, any major troop deployment should be a bright red line, and crossing it must be strongly resisted.

Crucially, imperial power must be challenged in the ideological domain. Obviously, the motivations of Western governments in Libya are not purely humanitarian – if being so monochromatic about complex political, moral and legal questions is even possible. Obama’s speech on Libya also made it clear that the intervention is about preserving American interests. But these interests in Libya are not about toppling a “hostile regime” or about gaining access to its oil. Gaddafi has been far from hostile since 2003. He has been courted by and has happily done business with the West. A range of Western corporations enjoy easy access to Libya’s energy resources, including Italy’s ENI, Germany’s Wintershall, Britain’s BP, France’s Total and GDF Suez, the US’s ConocoPhillips, Hess, and Occidental, the Dutch/British Dutch Shell, Spain’s Repsol, Canada’s Suncor, and Norway’s Statoil. Rather, the Libyan intervention partly responded to humanitarian impulses and legitimate public pressure to act to prevent an imminent massacre. In so responding, the critical interest the interveners seek to preserve is the legitimacy of the paradigm of humanitarian intervention that has been used to justify imperial intervention from the Balkans to *ex post facto* in Iraq.

But as conservative hawks in the US opposed to Resolution 1973 warned, Libya also offers the opportunity to co-opt this paradigm and turn its potency against imperial power. It paves the way to demand that the UNSC protect protesters facing a military crackdown elsewhere in the Middle East, or that it should impose a No Fly Zone the next time Israel takes to bombing its neighbours. It offers a powerful tool to counter-engage and discredit imperial power, if not to compel it to act.

## **Supporting the Rebels**

Gaddafi’s response to protesters made armed struggle a necessity and gave rise to the Libyan People’s Army under the aegis of the rebel National Transitional Council. But the

fighting prowess of rebel militias has thus far proved inadequate. This is partly the result of inadequate weaponry. As noted, the rebels should be provided with weapons to defend themselves, and ideally with weapons systems that the professional soldiers in their midst are already proficient at using. But this is only one half of the problem. The rebels also face an absence of military leadership on the front lines. News reels display that the rebels, the majority of whom led civilian lives till recently, have been prone to confusion, and are lacking in military tactics and concerted strategy. A revolutionary army need not necessarily replicate the strict hierarchy of traditional militaries, but there is the dire need for planning from, and even deference to, trained military tacticians. A number of Libyan generals and other military officers have defected to the rebel's side, but do not appear to be in command of the efforts on the front lines. Without overcoming a lack of military organization, the rebels will remain ill-trained to use any weapons that may be supplied to them. They will also be unable to overcome the logistical challenges inherent in keeping a fighting force armed and fed over long supply lines. It is time for the rebel generals to offer their services at the front, lest they end up offering an opening for foreign trainers and technical experts to appear on Libya's landscape.

Yet the rebels must avoid the almost romantic tendency to view their movement primarily as a militia engaged in the zero-sum game of armed conquest of Libya. That is, the rebels must not seek solely to become the military victors in a civil war. Their struggle must remain a political one, with selective armed force a tool of necessity, not choice. And they must continue seeking legitimacy from the people of Libya by respecting human rights and avoiding civilian casualties – both concerns that the UN has also raised with respect to rebel forces. That NATO has also pointed to similar concerns indicates that the rebels' adherence to humanitarian norms could be the difference between retaining maximum autonomy and a widening foreign intervention.

The rebel advance on the town of Sirte will make this – and the extent to which Resolution 1973 justifies attacks on Gaddafi's forces – a far more pertinent issue. Sirte is strategically and symbolically important for both the rebels and Gaddafi. It is Gaddafi's hometown, and he once even considered making it his capital. From there, the coastal highway also leads straight on to Tripoli. Yet Gaddafi still enjoys relative legitimacy in Sirte and it was one of the few towns in Libya that did not see an uprising. Therefore, there is relatively little danger to civilians from Gaddafi's forces. Rather, it is a rebel assault that may put civilian lives in jeopardy. Should the rebels nevertheless seize a town that perhaps does not desire to be controlled by them? What would a rebel "occupation" of Sirte look like? And how should they act if the residents of Sirte themselves attempt to repel them?

These are the questions that the rebels and their supporters must ask themselves, for their legitimacy within Libya and in the eyes of the global community may depend on getting the answers right. As outlined by the renowned scholar of revolutionary movements, the late Dr. Eqbal Ahmed, the rebels must not solely focus on outfighting Gaddafi's forces but on out-administering the Libyan state. They must continue their efforts to bolster their own legitimacy while morally alienating Gaddafi's regime from the Libyan people. The recent string of high-level defections from Gaddafi's camp has not come about because

the rebels have gained the upper hand on the battlefield. In fact, Gaddafi's fighters have tenaciously held their own. Rather, they are a symptom of the increasing political stature of the Libyan rebels.

The rebels now control almost all of eastern Libya, the entire historical domain of Cyrenaica. They are also close to cementing their hold on most of Libya's oil wells and refineries which are concentrated in the east of the country. These will soon begin to bring the rebel movement considerable revenue. Thus, with an NFZ protecting rebel held territory, their most pressing need is not to transform themselves into a professional army but into a capable revolutionary movement. This will require forging closer links with the citizens committees that have sprung up in liberated Libya, assistance in administering the territories under rebel control, reaching out to the leaders of the tribal hinterlands of the south, politically organizing in loyalist-held territory, and actualizing a vision for a post-Gaddafi Libya. The rebels' offer of a comprehensive ceasefire with Gaddafi is a positive step. Such an avenue needs to be pursued fully and seriously even as political organizing and outreach continues. It also needs to be broadened by exploring other peaceful means to a post-Gaddafi Libya, including offers of mediation made by Turkey and others. Above all, the rebels should reach out to their compatriots across the country – insurgent and loyalist – and assure them that the future Libya belongs equally to all Libyans.

Thus the primary engagements for the rebels must be political rather than on the battlefield. Progressive movements and intellectuals can play a role in these endeavours by offering solidarity, support and assistance. The UN-sanctioned intervention in Libya is now a juridical and political reality, and one that has been called for by the Libyan rebels themselves. Imperial voices must not now be the only ones that the rebels have access to.

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