

Global NATO Interventionism: The Disaster in Libya

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Global Research, February 28, 2015

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

*The title of Horace Campbell's [book](#) on NATO's 2011 Libyan intervention, *Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya*, is an allusion to a Guardian article by Seumas Milne [entitled](#), "If the Libyan war was about saving lives, it was a catastrophic failure." Echoing Milne's use of "catastrophic" is apt. Claudia Gazzini of the liberal NGO International Crisis Group [points out](#) that, if the casualty figures provided by Libya's National Transitional Council are accurate, "the death toll subsequent to the seven-month NATO intervention was at least ten times greater than the tally of those killed in the first few weeks of the conflict" before NATO intervened. As Campbell shows, while NATO claimed to be protecting human rights, it bombed Libyan civilians and enabled the Libyan opposition to persecute black African migrant workers and ethnically cleanse the black Libyan town of Tawergha. Less than four years after NATO attacked Libya, Bernardino Leon, the United Nation's special envoy to Libya, [says](#) the country is "close to the point of no return."*

Perhaps as many as [two million](#) Libyan refugees have fled to Tunisia, though the exact figure is in dispute. In November, militants claiming affiliation with ISIS [secured control](#) of the Libyan city of Derna, where they have carried out public executions and assassinated activists.

Nicholas Pelham [reports](#) that almost all of the exiles who returned to Libya after the overthrow of the government have left; that more would have left had European consulates remained open; that warlords have taken power in several parts of the country; that "a once relatively homogenous society has splintered into multiple bickering armed groups"; that separatism has gained traction in Cyrenaica, which has just a third of Libya's population but two thirds of its oil fields, most of its aquifers, and the country's gold mines; that cafes and power stations have been burned; that embassies and assorted other targets have been car-bombed; and that airports have been attacked. Tripoli's population, Pelham writes, is "distraught," and Libyans "feel even more isolated than when the UN imposed sanctions on [Muammar] Gaddafi."

Nation Divided by Civil War

At the time of writing, negotiations are underway to end an [ongoing civil war](#). There are [two rival](#) seats of government, each with its own institutions. One is the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC), which was set up when the capital was seized by Libya Dawn after it did badly in parliamentary elections.

Libya Dawn is an umbrella organization made up of assorted [Islamist groups](#), including the Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia, which is backed by U.S. ally [Qatar](#), as well as various militia from Berber towns. Many of Libya Dawn's leaders are former fighters from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a jihadist organization that, before trying to kill [Gaddafi](#) in the 1990s,

fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan alongside Osama bin Laden. That group was backed by another U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia.

The other seat of government is the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. They have allied themselves with what remains of the Libyan state's armed forces and with troops loyal to former army commander Khalifa Haftar. The latter helped Gaddafi overthrow the previous regime in 1969 but fled Libya upon falling out with the colonel after Haftar led a failed war with Chad.

Haftar, who is believed to have [been a CIA asset](#), returned to Libya during the war against Gaddafi. Haftar's forces are backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, who have [bombed](#) parts of Libya. Haftar has shelled apartment blocks, Pelham reports, and bombed Tripoli's airports as passengers were about to board planes.

According to [Libya Body Count](#), nearly 3,000 Libyans have died violent deaths since the beginning of January 2014. As Pelham writes, the "scale of the terror and destruction" carried out by both Libya Dawn and Haftar's forces "far surpasses that of Gaddafi's last years. One wonders how many of the Westerners who cheered on the war against him recognize this."

That Egypt and Qatar - both staunch U.S. allies - are on opposing sides of the conflict suggests that the United States is effectively backing both sides of the Libyan civil war.

Campbell's book is a helpful guide to how Libya got to this point. At the outset he explains that, before the tumult in Libya began, "he had taken the position that though Gaddafi should be opposed, it was equally necessary to oppose the NATO intervention." While Campbell worried about how Gaddafi would respond to protesters, he regarded the social forces in Libya as politically underdeveloped and knew that the British and French "were up to mischief" once French President Nicolas Sarkozy began to champion the Libyan opposition, given that Sarkozy was "no friend of progressive African movements."

Campbell's view of the Libyan crisis is consonant with the one put forth in an open [letter](#) signed by two hundred African intellectuals, a document to which Campbell repeatedly returns. It expressed "our desire, not to take sides, but to protect the sovereignty of Libya and the right of the Libyan people to choose their own destiny." Toward the end, the letter stated:

"Those who have brought a deadly rain of bombs on Libya today should not delude themselves to believe that the apparent silence of the millions of Africans [sic] means that Africa approved of the campaign of death, destruction and domination which that rain represents. ... The answer we must provide practically, and as Africans, is - when, and in what ways, will we act resolutely and meaningfully to defend the right of the Africans of Libya to decide their future, and therefore the right and duty of all Africans to determine their destiny!"

As Campbell's book makes clear, he and the signatories of that letter were justified in their suspicion that imperialist states and their allies were motivated to intervene in Libya by concerns other than the welfare of Libyans. In that sense, Campbell's book is an ideal companion piece to Maximilian Forte's [important](#) *Slouching Toward Sirte*. While Forte's book is notable for its [meticulous](#) detailing of how events played out in the Libyan affair, Campbell

situates these in the larger context of the international capitalist dynamics driving them. While it is not perfect, anyone with an interest in NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya should read Campbell's book. At times it meanders, and several claims that should be supported by citations are not. What he offers, however, is both an illuminating account of how Libya was torn asunder and an extremely useful contribution to efforts to understand precisely how militarized imperialist capitalism operates.

Campbell's central premise is that NATO, and its allies such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, took advantage of and exacerbated the crisis that emerged in Libya following the protests that began in February 2011. The ruling classes in NATO states exploited the Libyan protests to assert Western military and economic control in Africa and to curtail efforts to create African unity and autonomy from the West. Wikileaks cables show Gaddafi's government was seen as a barrier to these aims, and NATO's Libyan expedition was also propelled by frustration in the elite sectors of Western states over their inability to control Libyan assets in the financial sector.

Ulterior Motives

One of Campbell's most important insights is that the decision of Western powers and their allies to seek regime change in Libya has to be understood in the context of the 2008 financial meltdown. Whereas in the crisis of the 1930s colonial powers forced Africans to increase agricultural production so they could continue extracting the same value from the continent that they had before the Depression, Campbell suggests that in response to the 2008 crisis imperial powers had to find new ways of prying wealth from African states because they are now formally independent. Taking advantage of the turmoil in Libya in early 2011 was one way to do that, particularly because European powers did not have as much access as they would have liked to resource-rich Africa, and the NATO states were alarmed by China's increasing role on the continent. Even during the Gaddafi government's détente with the West, the Libyan state remained an obstacle to Western imperialist endeavors such as the building of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) military bases.

These tensions came to a head in early 2011, when, Campbell contends, elites in the U.S. wanted to "preempt other revolutionary uprisings of the type and scale that removed the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt," a goal that he [says](#) was "outlined by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C., at a major seminar on the implications of the uprising in Egypt."

Moreover, Campbell writes that shortly after Tripoli fell, and the Libyan government was all but defeated, the Italian energy giant ENI was in the city to discuss resumption of Libyan gas exports. He characterizes Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron's visit to Tripoli a few days later as an instance of "fierce competition between French and other Western forces for control over the future of Libyan oil" and quotes the *Guardian's* description of the trip as "first and foremost, the Dave and Sarko spoils of war tour."

In addition to oil, Campbell suggests that the coalition that overthrew Gaddafi is also likely interested in the enormous water wealth of Libya's Nubian Sandstone Aquifer and the 4,000-kilometer Great Manmade River Project, as well as in exploiting the physical and mental labour of the Libyan people. This is the framework in which one should consider the British defense secretary's remark near the end of the NATO intervention that business people should "pack their bags" for Libya and the U.S. ambassador in Tripoli's claim that Libya had a "need" for American companies on a "big scale."

Goldman Sachs in Tripoli

Campbell describes how the financialization of the energy sector deepened alliances between banks and oil companies, particularly after the banks lost billions in the subprime mortgage crisis and placed greater emphasis on energy trading.

During Gaddafi's rapprochement with the west, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and neoliberal "reformers" in Gaddafi's government entered the financial sector by establishing the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA), a holding company responsible for managing the Libyan government's investments in the oil and gas industry in the international finance market. The LIA paid Goldman Sachs \$1.3-billion for options on currencies and stocks. However, the credit crisis caused the value of Libya's investments in Goldman to drop 98 per cent. Those losses created tension between Goldman and the Libyan leadership - Libya ultimately rejected Goldman's efforts to get them to further invest in the company, and the parties did not agree on a deal to compensate Libya for the lost money. Since the overthrow of Gaddafi, Campbell reports, there has been very little discussion of how Libya might recoup these losses.

A closely related issue was Libya's bumpy relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organization established in 1981 by the pro-U.S. governments of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to, in Campbell's words, "recycle the resources of Arabia for the Western financial system." At the time of NATO's intervention, Campbell claims, Wall Street speculators allied with the GCC in a struggle with the Libyan leadership for control of the Bahrain-based Arab Banking Corporation, a major player in regional offshore, investment banking, and project finance services. The reason for the dispute was that the Libyans, Campbell says, wanted "to move the Arab Banking Group out of its servile position to Western banking interests," a shift opposed by the Kuwait Investment Authority, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, and other shareholders.

When NATO wanted the appearance of broad Arab support for the no-fly zone over Libya, an endorsement came from the Arab League in a vote that was held when only eleven of the twenty-two member states were present. Six of the nine who voted in favor were members of the GCC.

Moreover, the LIA, like many Western firms, invested billions in energy money in the "dark markets" of the UAE. Campbell suggests throughout the book that the neoliberals in Gaddafi's government who were aligned with Western intellectuals of a similar persuasion ultimately helped bring about the government's demise.

Despite opposition from their nationalist counterparts, the neoliberals entangled the country's assets with Western companies, who were then able to restrict the Libyan state's financial options at a crucial moment. After the beginning of the February 2011 uprisings, "when the Libyans started to move to divest their funds from their overexposure to British and U.S. financial institutions, Libya's assets were frozen. This was prior to the ruse of protecting Libyans."

Because of the opaque nature of international markets, one can hardly demand of Campbell unambiguous proof of causation between the banks and energy firms' relations with the Libyan government and NATO's decision to overthrow Gaddafi. For the same reason, details about the activities of - and relationships between - these actors are necessarily scarce.

Still, Campbell manages to paint a picture of the Libyan state's often-tumultuous relationship with the financial sector that dominates NATO states. Consequently, his theory that the Gaddafi government's relationship with other players in the financial sector was a driving force behind the NATO intervention will seem perfectly plausible to readers familiar with the leading role that Wall Street has played throughout the history of American imperialism. In contrast, readers who embrace the "bumbling empire" theory of U.S. foreign policy in North Africa will be less willing to accept that the U.S. government knows what it's doing.

Internationalism, Not Intervention

As Campbell writes, chronicling the cataclysmic results of recent imperialist ventures in the Middle East and Africa is not about "gloating but part of an effort to strengthen the resolve of the peace and justice movement to challenge militarism and exploitation."

One aspect of this worthy goal must be opposing those ostensible leftists who call for Western-led military interventions in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Ukraine. Western military interventions like the one in Libya are expressions of capitalist hegemony and only wind up strengthening that hegemony.

If leftists want to build alternatives to global capitalism, we must recognize that claims to internationalism are worse than meaningless when they enable imperialist bloodbaths. •

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