

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT CONQUEST: What does Libya tell us about Intervention in Syria and Iran?

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Debkafle reported on 17 January that an imminent joint Israeli-US exercise had been cancelled by Israel's prime minister, and not by the US as widely supposed. Convinced that Iran has made the decision to become a nuclear power Mr Netanyahu is preparing for possible unilateral attacks on Iranian nuclear sites.

British press reports say agents from the CIA and MI6 are operating within Syria while British and French Special Forces are training members of the Free Syrian Army in Turkey. Pravda has claimed that NATO snipers who fought in Libya have been sent to Syria.

As regional war threatens drastic and unforeseen consequences in the Middle East some commentators claim that humanitarian benefits justify Western intervention in repressive states. This claim is worth considering in the context of the events that have befallen Libya.

No one should be under any illusions about the intentions of Western governments in Libya following their activities throughout the 42 years of Muammar Qaddafi's rule. During this time there were 39 coup attempts inspired by US, British and French agencies, most of which were centred on Benghazi and the province of Cyrenaica. Many involved an attempt at assassination, as did the US fighter-bomber attack on Tripoli in 1986 in which eight of the 18 aircraft flying from Britain specifically targeted Col Qaddafi's private residence.

Qaddafi's overthrow began as an uprising in Benghazi which followed a Facebook call, from London on 17 February 2011, to commemorate the 2005 massacre at Abu Salim prison. In response to the ensuing fighting the UN Security Council unanimously approved resolution 1970 on 26 February. Calling for an end to all violence, it required all member states to apply an arms embargo which also prohibited the provision of technical assistance, training, finance and all other assistance related to military activities. It soon became clear that British forces were in breach of the resolution when six members of the SAS were taken prisoner by rebels in Benghazi on 4 March. What the troop was trying to achieve, and what went wrong with the operation has never been revealed.

Following reports of civilian massacres by Libyan aircraft the Security Council responded by approving resolution 1973 on 17 March 2011, although this time one-third of the fifteen members abstained. (The claims concerning civilian massacres were later refuted by Amnesty International, along with allegations that the Libyan regime had been employing foreign mercenaries.) This called for an immediate cease-fire and for all sides to seek a solution to the crisis while requiring them to protect civilians. Responding to a call from the

Arab League it authorised the enforcement of a no-fly zone.

A US-drafted amendment allowed for “all necessary measures [to protect Libyan civilians] under threat of attack”. The American Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, promptly claimed that this allowed for arming the rebels under the terms of the resolution. Jose Cabral, the chair of the Sanctions Committee, disagreed and declared that “the resolution [1973] imposes a full embargo on arms.” The US and NATO however had no interest in legal formalities and large quantities of arms were subsequently supplied to the rebels from Qatar via the Egyptian border. France also in shipped some supplies direct, while NATO Special Forces supplied training and expertise.

On the following day and in response to resolution 1973, the Libyan Foreign Minister announced an immediate ceasefire and a stoppage of all military operations against rebel forces. The next day, 19 March, French aircraft carried out an airstrike which was followed by the launch of 110 Tomahawk missiles by US and British warships against air defences in Tripoli and Misrata. Thus only two days after its approval, the Security Council resolution was rendered a sham by NATO forces which placed civilian lives unnecessarily at risk when they ignored the offer of an immediate cease-fire and refused to seek a solution to the crisis. All subsequent calls for a ceasefire by the Libyan government were summarily dismissed by either the rebels or NATO. By 29 March the Russian Foreign Minister was moved to comment “We consider that intervention by the coalition in what is essentially an internal civil war is not sanctioned by the UN Security Council resolution.”

Apart from coverage of the murder of Muammar Qaddafi and his contemptuous secret burial there has been little mainstream reportage of the results arising from this international banditry. Even casualty figures are vague. (NATO does not do casualty figures: they have still to produce accurate figures for the number of civilians killed during the bombing of Kosovo in 1999. Sorting out the carnage is always someone else’s responsibility.) The lowest estimate of casualties came from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) which claimed in September that “between 50-100 civilians had perished from air strikes in the six months of the campaign”. Considering even the National Transitional Council has estimated 30,000 dead and 50,000 injured, RUSI’s claim is an insult to intelligence. One of the highest estimates has come from Thomas Mountain, who used the NATO figure of 9,658 strike sorties flown to estimate that 30,000 tons of explosives were used, and by allowing two deaths per ton arrived at a death toll of 60,000.

Failing any details from the perpetrators themselves some of the vocal supporters for this war might have provided details on their behalf. Brian Whitaker of the Guardian has written extensively on the subject, and like a barrack room lawyer picked over the Security Council resolutions to claim that NATO forces on the ground were legal. (Jose Cabral’s statement was not amongst the information he considered.) However Mr Whitaker’s personal website al-Bab, stopped writing about the Libyan war in August, and has therefore not covered the devastation left in the wake of the bombardment. The veteran peace campaigner Uri Avnery also supported the war (and proposed a similar intervention in Syria) suggesting that opponents of the action were driven by a hatred of the US and NATO rather than any concern for the people of Libya. He added that he was “ready to support even the devil, if that is necessary to put an end to this kind of atrocities”. For the people of Sirte this might sound bitterly ironic, particularly since Mr Avnery has not returned to the subject to write about their once prosperous city that now resembles war-torn Stalingrad or Fallujah. Uri Avnery wondered whether opponents of the NATO operation were really concerned for the

well-being of the Libyan people. Bassam Haddad, writing on the Jadaliyya website, had similar concerns about criticism of the Syrian regime, while expressing his desire to see an end to the abuse of human rights in Syria. But Prof Haddad is under no illusion about the duplicity and self-interest driving foreign interference, and appears to draw an opposing conclusion:

“... the actors that are amassed to benefit from the fall of the Syrian regime are, in the final analysis, no less problematic than the Syrian regime itself. In sum, these actors are certainly more violent, discriminatory, and anti-democratic in terms of their collective and/or individual long-term vision for the region.”

But if one did need to have an object to hate, then the calculating planners of the Libyan rape, who appear indifferent to all the misery they have caused, would make as good an object as any. Prior to the bombing, Libya had the best health care and the best education in Africa, free of charge. Essential food staples were heavily subsidised, while fuel was plentiful and cheap. Having bombed to kingdom come schools, hospitals, electricity and water supplies, oil installations, men, women, children, black Africans and Arabs, the planes and warships have departed. Reports of the use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs suggest that they will have left some areas dangerously polluted as well as poverty stricken. An occupation army is now preparing to arrive: according to former US Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, 12,000 US troops in Malta are about to move into Libya, while trigger-happy NATO troops already occupy the petroleum platforms and ports.

There have been victory speeches from Nicholas Sarkozy (who received Col Gaddafi as a guest of honour in France only two years ago), David Cameron (who visited Egypt peddling British arms immediately after the fall of Hosni Mubarak) and Barak Obama. (What greater irony could befall those who were conquered, injured or even killed, at the behest of a peace prize laureate? What greater folly could the Nobel Prize committee have concocted?)

And still the misery continues. The entire 31,000 population of Tawergha are said to have fled their homes during the war and it is not clear how many have returned. IRIN has reported that the delivery of emergency humanitarian aid has been hindered by a lack of funding, despite the fact that NATO countries control over \$100billion worth of frozen assets belonging to the people of Libya. In mid-December International Crisis Group reported that more than 125,000 Libyans now carry arms, while estimates on the number of militias range from between 100 to 300. Rivalry exists among the different bands which issue their own identity cards, apply their own investigation techniques and issue arrest warrants (and reportedly in Misrata continue to kill black Libyans). Feuding is commonplace. Meanwhile senior officials who defected from the former regime (possibly after payoffs from NATO) expect to retain positions in the new leadership.

It must be acknowledged that Qaddafi the tyrant is dead. In a perfect world he most certainly would have faced trial in the International Criminal Court, following even worse criminals such as George W Bush and Tony Blair. In this context it should not be forgotten that the crimes of Barak Obama, which include greatly expanding the drone attacks on civilian areas in Pakistan, might have earned the death penalty at Nuremburg. In our imperfect world Col Qaddafi brought stability and prosperity to Libya along with considerable benefits to other parts of Africa. No less an eminence than Nelson Mandela paid homage to this. Above all, Qaddafi's nefarious crimes do not justify the savage assault that has befallen his people.

With the re-colonisation of Libya completed, NATO and its allies are looking for the next

conquest. In this they are being encouraged once again by some sincere peace activists. These people would be well advised to do the arithmetic. In eight months between 30 and 60 thousand Libyans are believed to have been killed. By contrast in eleven months the estimated death toll in Syria is between five and seven thousand. In addition Syrian buildings and infrastructure appear to remain largely intact and there is no danger from the remains of depleted uranium or cluster bombs.

At the present time amidst the chaos and the mayhem it is still Syrian citizens who control Syrian assets. This is not the case in Libya, where NATO troops control the nation's desirable assets, and the imminent arrival of US occupation troops, according to evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan, is to be feared rather than welcomed.

The jokers in the pack this time are Russia and China who, duped and angered by NATO's shameful misuse of resolution 1973 and excluded from future trading deals in Libya, are more minded to apply a proactive stance on behalf of Syria and Iran. This is likely to mean support for the existing repressive regimes, such as the shipload of munitions that Russia recently sent to Syria. The problem is that outside interference reduces the opportunities for internal compromises that could herald new freedoms.

During the twentieth century both Syria and Libya experienced the brutal repression and racism of European colonialism, while Iran was invaded by British Empire forces a few years before Anglo-American meddling imposed a brutal puppet regime. For Libya a parallel experience has now returned. For Syria and Iran the same fate awaits the unwary and the unprepared. The dark shadow of colonial occupation has made an unexpected and unwelcome return.

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