

The Fall of Libya: A Study in Hypocrisy

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Perhaps no war in recent memory has so thoroughly flummoxed the Euro-Atlantic left as the recent NATO war on Libya. Presaging what would occur as U.S. proxies carried out an assault on Syria, both a pro-war left and an anti-war left started filling up socialist e-zines and broadsheets with endless explanations and tortuous justifications for why a small invasion, perhaps just a “no-fly-zone,” would be okay—so long as it didn’t grow into a larger intervention. They cracked open the door to imperialism, with the understanding that it would be watched very carefully so as to make sure that no more of it would be allowed in than was necessary to carry out its mission.

The absurdity of this posture became clear when NATO immediately expanded its mandate and bombed much of Libya to smithereens, with the help of on-the-ground militia, embraced as revolutionaries by those who should have known better—and according to [Maximilian Forte](#), could have known better, had they only looked.

Forte is an anthropologist, and what he offers us in [Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa](#) is an ethnography of U.S. culture and the way it enabled and contributed to the destruction of Libya. It is also a meticulously documented study in hypocrisy: that of the U.S. elite, of the Gulf ruling classes who have lately welded their agenda directly onto that of the United States, and of the liberal bombardiers who emerged in the crucible of the “humanitarian” wars of the 1990s only to reemerge as cheerleaders for the destruction of another Arab country in 2011.

Finally, it is a study of the breakdown of the anti-war principles of leftists in the United States and Europe, so many of whom, for so long, sustained an infatuation with confused rebels whose leadership early on had their hand out to the U.S. empire, prepared to pay any cost—including Libya itself—to take out a leader under whom they no longer were prepared to live.

 Forte begins by describing Sirte, the emblem of the new state Qadhafi—and almost literally, Qadhafi—had constructed with the post-1973 torrent of petrodollars flowing into Libyan coffers in the wake of a series of price increases which Qadhafi’s aggressive resource nationalism had played a part in securing. Sirte was, in effect, a second capital, thick with new buildings and lavished with benefits from the money which had streamed into the new Libya. Qadhafi hosted numerous convocations there, including summits for the Organization for African Unity, a new pan-African network which he played a large part in developing. Sirte was also the place where Qadhafi had chosen to summon the ConocoPhillips CEO in 2008 to criticize the way he was dealing with the company’s oil contracts in Libya.

Forte turns the fate of Sirte into a parable of the fate of Libya, as it fell under, and with,

Qadhafi. Indeed, Sirte was one of the places especially targeted by the rebellious forces of the National Transition Council: Forte quotes an AP report stating that “Residents now believe the Misrata fighters intentionally destroyed Sirte, beyond the collateral damage of fighting.”

It is to that destruction that Forte turns. Against too many accounts of the attack on Libya which make far too much of the partial rapprochement between Libya and the United States in the post-Global War on Terror interlude, Forte looks back at the historically belligerent face the United States had shown Libya, especially under Reagan: bombing it repeatedly, and taking down Libyan fighter jets defending Libyan land in the Gulf of Sirte, trying to get members of the Organization for African Unity to censure Libya, and then putting in place a series of sanctions against the Libyan government. Although many of the sanctions were eventually lifted, the close U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia, sponsor of the *mujahideen* who had attempted to assassinate Qadhafi in 1996, continued, contributing to lasting friction between the government of Libya and the government of the United States.

Forte’s contribution here is to complicate the meaning of words like “rebellion” and “revolution” too often incanted to short circuit independent thought. His method is to look at the revolt which was happening in parts of Libya and then to zoom in on Sirte, the Qadhafi stronghold, to see if indeed the revolt was taking place there. To the contrary, Forte finds that the NATO/NTC (National Transitional Council) assault on Sirte continued for months before the rebels were finally able to take control of the city. Their assault consisted of indiscriminate bombing using heavy weaponry, a fact Forte is able to establish using mainstream media reporting of the civil war.

Furthermore, Forte is able to bring to bear evidence that NATO carried out extensive war crimes during its “liberation” of Sirte, and the evidence he brings to bear is impeccable: the statements of the NATO command and the various human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, finding evidence of massacres of captured pro-Qadhafi fighters and even of civilians. Even more damning is the quotation from Georg Charpentier, the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya, who could speak in October 2011 of the “liberation of Bani Walid and Sirte in October,” and then in another note that “Public infrastructure, housing, education and health facilities need to be rehabilitated, reconstructed, and reactivated, intense and focused reconciliation efforts also need to be encouraged.”

This and dozens of quotations like it attest to NATO’s knowledge of what it was doing: intervening on one side of a civil war, for “reconciliation” is only necessary when you have two sides, and by elevating one side to angelic revolutionaries, one is laying the groundwork for legitimizing the wholesale destruction of the other.

Another strength of the book is Forte’s account of the double standards not just of the Western states and human rights organizations but also—perhaps especially—of Al Jazeera and its inflated, not to say fabricated, accounts of atrocities and particularly the way it incited racial hatred against darker Libyans.

Forte also clearly shows that Qadhafi had what is now spitefully referred to as a “social base”—as though the modern state is merely a crime syndicate rather than tightly integrated into social reproduction. The avoidance of these questions by dominant currents of the Euro-Atlantic socialist left led to a situation in which too many no longer seem able to

distinguish between riots, revolts, and revolutions.

So how did NATO go about intervening? And how did it exploit the Libyan regime's vulnerabilities? Here Forte seems to misstep a little. He writes of the very real improvements in social welfare, under a populist rentier social contract, and links those improvements to the government. But here some more delving into the academic literature, books such as Ruth First's or Dirk Vandewalle's, would have been helpful. While living standards were improving, and the oil wealth was going to the hands of the Libyan people—at least in part—the deliberate “statelessness” of the Qadhafi government had created a situation within which the state was materially embedded within the society, but links between the two were one of a social rather than a civic contract. Anomie and estrangement prevailed under the later Qadhafi, and the people living under his government increasingly felt that they were not the owners of their country. Legitimate discontent grew.

With the advent of the Arab Spring, that discontent found an outlet: revolt. Here Forte moves to surer ground. Disregarding narratives of a “peaceful revolt” militarized only in reluctant response to state savagery, he finds that the revolt was militarized practically from day one, with an attack on a Libyan military barracks. Forte documents that the right wing of the regime was clearly prepared to execute a coup d'état against Qadhafi, with the open assistance of France, the United States, and especially Qatar, which sent in special forces, airplanes, and gunships to ensure his rapid deposition.

Forte goes further than most other analysts of the Libyan coup d'état but at the same time not far enough. Al Jazeera, the television station owned by the Emir of Qatar and early on christened the voice of the Arab Spring, started reporting on “massacres” carried out by “black mercenaries” in Libya, starting February 17 and 18, 2011. The sourcing tended to be to anonymous activists in Benghazi or elsewhere—a script later replayed in Syria, where articles from Al Jazeera are so liberally brocaded with “activists say” to the point where little of what the article says is anything but what activists have said. Such subterfuges have escaped much of the left, and for that reason Forte's account is laced with contempt for their gullibility with respect to opposition propaganda.

Furthermore, Forte does a very good job of pulling together the reasons the United States never liked Qadhafi—his prickliness with respect to U.S. investment, his leadership in Africa, his support of the African National Congress, and his resolute hostility to AFRICOM and U.S. bases on African soil. Far too much has been made of Qadhafi's cozying up to the United States after 2004. What is forgotten is that the United States maintains hostility to *any* state-capitalist regime that is not fully integrated with and subservient to the U.S. global system, with respect both to the free flow of capital and foreign policy. On both counts, Qadhafi failed—the Heritage Foundation, which reports on what matters to the people who matter, found that Iran, Libya, and Syria have been the most “economically repressed” countries in the region—that is, the least open to U.S. investment, while far too often supporting Palestinian resistance movements, decrying normalization with Israel, giving aid to the left wing of Fateh, and other recalcitrant behavior which U.S. imperialists never forgot.

Libya offers a place to rethink dominant theories of imperialism, which have trouble accounting for the role of Western capitalist interests with respect to state-capitalist regimes, even ones implementing neoliberal economic programs or hollowing out their domestic industrial or agricultural sectors. What those theories miss is the resolute hostility

of the U.S. state and ruling class to any foreign leadership which seems to be carrying out a national project.

A weakness of Forte's book is that although he is a leftist, he is not a Marxist. So an occasion is lost to think about the ways in which the positive social transformations carried out under the Qadhafi junta also had the effect of contributing to the future downfall of Libya—for lacking a revolution within the Green Revolution, there was a counter-coup by the regime's right wing against the populist coup d'état under which Qadhafi came to power. The left needs to understand both the benefits afforded by populist regimes and the limits they impose. The object is to understand what kind of opposition movements can arise which can both defend the gains of previous—and also deeply flawed—governments while simultaneously advancing on them, to further horizons. But these are theoretical and political problems that were with us before the destruction of Libya and will remain with us after. It is to the knowledge of this sordid event of the Euro-Atlantic left that Forte has made an important contribution, one which ought be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in and concerned about the destruction of Libya, and looking to understand more fully the next targets of empire.

SLOUCHING TOWARDS SIRTE: NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA AND AFRICA

Available to order from Global Research



[Slouching Towards Sirte:
NATO's War on Libya and Africa](#)

by [Maximilian Forte](#)

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