

Libya and Its Contexts

BY GREG SHUPAK

The Libyan campaign not only caused extensive death and human rights violations, but it may usher in decades of more war.



Our new issue, on the housing crisis and capitalism, is coming soon. Get a discounted subscription today.

Liberal interventionists thought they had this one. Their doctrine had seemingly triumphed in Libya. Not only were the usual suspects, the Christopher Hitchenses, the Bernard-Henri Levys, peddling the notion that NATO could be a global constabulary for the enforcement of human rights, but more careful commentators like Juan Cole and Gilbert Achcar had also backed Western intervention.

But the shine was, from the start, an illusion, as Maximilian Forte proves in his important new book, *Slouching Towards Sirte*. Forte thoroughly chronicles NATO's bombing of Libya and the crimes against humanity for which NATO is responsible.

Forte describes numerous NATO operations which, he argues, rose to the level of war crimes. For example, he discusses a NATO strike on a farming compound in the town of Majer on 8 August 2011. A Human Rights Watch investigation concluded that NATO fired on the compound twice, the second time killing 34 civilians who had come to look for survivors.

Racist Rebels

One lesson liberal interventionists should draw from the Libyan war is that the mere fact of opposing a tyrant does not indicate that a given rebel group values human rights. Forte persuasively demonstrates that the *thawar* — the anti-Qadhafi fighters — had no such standards.

The most serious indictment of NATO's rebel allies is their violent treatment of black Libyans and migrant workers from countries in southern Africa. For instance, when Tripoli fell to rebels in August 2011, a reporter for the *Independent* visited a makeshift hospital controlled by the insurgents and found the decomposing bodies of 30 men, many of whom had their hands bound behind their backs.

Other evidence confirms Forte's account. For example, an Amnesty International report notes that the rebels "have arrested" many suspected African mercenaries "although such 'arrests' are better described as abductions."

Forte pays particular attention to the experience of the black residents of Tawergha, a town adjoining Misrata. Insurgents from Misrata depopulated Tawergha of virtually all of its 10,000–30,000 predominantly black residents and looted and vandalized their homes.

A Propaganda Campaign

To the extent that the enduring conservative justification for militarism is that every world leader opposed to Western interests is another Hitler, the equivalent for liberal interventionists is the notion that any party to a conflict that they both side with, and deem likely to lose, are the next Rwandan Tutsis.

Hysterical claims that Qadhafi was on the verge of carrying out a genocide rang out in the Western press. However, these had little basis. Forte quotes Alan J. Kuperman, noting that, "The best evidence that Khadafi did not plan genocide in Benghazi is that he did not perpetrate it in the other cities he had recaptured either fully or partially — including Zawiya, Misurata, and Ajdabiya."

Furthermore, the ground for instituting a no-fly zone over Libya through UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was the assertion that Qadhafi was bombing protesters from the sky. Yet, as Forte demonstrates, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that he had no confirmation that Qadhafi fired on Libyans from the air.

The Legitimacy of Political Violence

Underlying Forte's accounts of the use of force are vital questions about the legitimacy of political violence. Forte rightly questions why the "international community" permits NATO to carry out a brutal counter-insurgency that is designed to keep Afghan President Hamid Karzai's undemocratic regime in power instead of a ruthless insurgency but is indignant at the prospect of Qadhafi's undemocratic regime doing the same to keep itself in power and ward off a ruthless insurgency.

Yet, on the question of the legitimacy of political violence, one could argue that Forte at times ensnares himself in a parallel trap. Hostile readers of his book may come away with the impression that Forte believes Libyans had no right to undertake armed struggle against Qadhafi's dictatorship under any circumstances — or perhaps even that he views the very idea of a Libyan uprising as something that is, even apart from NATO involvement, to be opposed.

For these reasons, the right position on the situation faced by Libyans in February–March 2011 would have been to seek the earliest possible end to armed hostilities. Ample opportunities for a negotiated settlement to the Libyan conflict existed, and Forte shows how NATO and its allies scuttled all attempts to facilitate a peaceful solution to the war.

African Contexts

The blockage of the AU plan is crucial because it offers some insight into the question of why the West fought its war in the Jamahiriya. As Forte's book clarifies, NATO's war in Libya was at least in part a war for power and control in Africa, one which has hastened the militarization of the continent.

The rise and fall of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) is another key context. CEN-SAD is a Tripoli-Based regional body, formed in 1998 to promote trade, free movement, telecommunications, and security among its member countries.

In view of this, it will come as no surprise that in the month of Qadhafi's murder, the US announced it was sending troops to the Central African Republic, Uganda, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. With Qadhafi's regime gone, AFRICOM announced before Libya could have an election that a new military relationship had been established between AFRICOM and a post-Qadhafi Libyan government that was appointed by the NTC.

Another key background point to the war on Libya is China's ongoing competition with Western interests for access and influence in Africa. In 2009, China surpassed the US as Africa's largest trading partner. The continent supplied China with a third of its imports and was its second largest source of oil.

As NATO's war in Libyan played out, it was primarily understood within two narratives — a humanitarian one, as well as that of the so-called Arab Spring. Both conceptions suffer from their lack of understanding of the war's African contexts, which suggest that the continent is at risk of again becoming a global hotspot over which foreign powers battle.

Abolish the Billionaire Class
Luke Savage

A Plan to Win Socialism In America
Peter Gowan

Wielding the Imperial Presidency
Maggan Day

Ihan Omar Is Not Antisemitic
Seth Ackerman

SUBSCRIBE

OUR NEW ISSUE, ON THE HOUSING CRISIS AND CAPITALISM, IS COMING SOON. GET A DISCOUNTED SUBSCRIPTION TODAY.

DONATE

FURTHER READING

- China Is Not the Problem. Capitalism Is. Nicole M. Aschhoff
- Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil Is a Nightmare That Could Get Worse Sabrina Fernandes
- How the Green New Deal Can Deliver Land Justice Audrea Lim
- "I Didn't Sit Eight and a Half Years in Jail to Build Capitalism" David Ost
- War With Iran Would Be a Murderous Disaster Noach Kulwin

• Catalyst •

CATALYST, A NEW JOURNAL PUBLISHED BY JACOBIN, IS OUT NOW.

SIGN UP FOR OUR MAILING LIST

EMAIL ADDRESS HERE

SUBMIT

JACOBIN