

# The Price of the Divide on Libya

## Why I support the No Fly Zone

### An Opinion Divided

The international military intervention in Libya has divided opinion, particularly on the Left into two camps, the pro-interventionists who argue that without this action the uprising would have been crushed, and the anti-interventionists who define it as a military assault equivalent to the war in Iraq. Central to this division is an apparent contradiction between supporting the people's revolution against autocracy and

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an anti-imperialist stance which denounces Western hypocrisy. As a Libyan, I reject this false contradiction. I see no logic in a tortuous argument which declares itself to be for the people's revolution, but against the intervention that sustained it. That, to me, would be the contradiction.

The accusations levelled at the pro-interventionists include the charges of hypocrisy and naivety. The questions fly: How can you believe that this is a humanitarian intervention? What about Yemen and Bahrain? What about Afghanistan and Iraq? What about Rwanda and the Congo? The charge of naivety is popular, because proving you're not naive can be difficult. I don't speak for all Libyans, but I can speak for myself and for those I know, and we do not need to be told that those intervening in Libya are acting in their own interests. None

of us believes that this so-called humanitarian intervention is motivated solely by concern for human life. Libyans know who rehabilitated Gaddafi during the last decade. We watched Berlusconi kiss his hand, Clinton pose with Gaddafi's son Mutassim and Blair sit in his tent and announce a New Era, all during which the brutality of the regime was being masked by the thinnest possible patina of change, the change of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's PR machine employed from the West.

We also remember when Gaddafi was lionized by some in the left as an anti-imperialist Nasserite during the 1970s and 1980s, a time of public executions, when Libyans were poisoned against progressive ideas because of the brutality of the regime that pretended to espouse them. We remember when Gaddafi was the enemy of the West. We remember Operation El Dorado Canyon<sup>1</sup>. We remember the collective punishment of sanctions, as a whole nation was held responsible for Pan Am 103, only adding to the suffering of the most vulnerable. We remember when we were the pariah-state, and Libyans were the terrorists after the plutonium. None of us are apolitical or naive, we haven't had a chance to be. Yet we supported the intervention.

### Hypothetical Questions

Denouncing the Libyan pro-interventionist stance disregards the Libyan people's knowledge of their own history, and is made worse by the fact that some anti-interventionists are intent on justifying their stance at all costs, to the extent of overlooking or minimizing the

<sup>1</sup> The 1986 U.S. bombing of Libya carried out in response to the Berlin discotheque bombing of the same year.

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atrocities committed against Libyan citizens by the Gaddafi regime so as to bolster arguments against the intervention. Some have gone so far as to justify the regime's brutal crackdown, using Gaddafi's claims of secessionist movements, ignoring the fact that resistance is as strong in Misrata in the west Libya as in Benghazi in the east. Others will mine neoconservative material and echo Gaddafi's accusations that the uprising was led by Al-Qaeda, asking the by now ubiquitous question "who are the "rebels" anyway?" Some point out that the leadership of the revolution is suspect, and argue that a post-Gaddafi Libya will prove to be worse than the Gaddafi regime. Others simply deny that Gaddafi's atrocities took place, arguing that the humanitarian crisis was engineered. This relies on an argument that the prospect of a massacre in Benghazi was overstated, an argument which ignores not only Gaddafi's own promises of going "house to house" to "cleanse" Libya, but the practical consequences of that rhetoric, demonstrated in the stifling of dissent in Tripoli, in the brutal crushing of the uprising in towns such as Zawiyah and Zwara, and the ongoing bombardment and siege of Misrata and Zintan and the Nafousa Mountain. The truth is that what would have happened in Benghazi had the airstrikes not happened remains a hypothetical question. The city could have held out as long as Misrata under siege and bombardment, or Gaddafi forces could have moved in en masse to decisively crush the centre of the rebellion, ensuring that the greatest challenge the Gaddafi mafia has faced in its four decade rule is suppressed with enough force that no one can dare to dream about freedom from the regime again. What does seem self-evident is that the regime had no incentive to agree to a cease-fire while Gaddafi's forces were massed at the gates of Benghazi.

When I look at the arguments made by those in the anti-intervention camp, I'm reminded why I made my decision. I need the reminder because it was not an easy decision to make. The morning I woke up to find a column of tanks a few kilometers outside Benghazi and

wished for air-strikes to make them disappear, I asked myself whether it was only because I am Libyan. I imagined an alternate and, more just universe where the UN Security Council had made the same choice to protect civilians during the Gaza war which left over 1400 people dead. There is no question in my mind that whether the action was called a "no fly zone plus" or a "kinetic military action," I would have supported it, as long as those on the ground supported it. In Libya, I look to the cities that

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have been bombarded by Gaddafi's forces for over a month and I see none of the ideological arguments against intervention coming from them. I choose to take my cue from the people most affected, not from pundits.

### **The Argument of Double Standards**

The most frequent case made against the intervention among leftists is that it is hypocritical, exposing the double standards of the West in the region. As protests rage across much of the Arab world, many raise the question why Libya, and not for example, Yemen or Bahrain, where protesters have also been faced with deadly violence. The long history of Western support for Arab dictators provides this argument with an irrefutable logic which obscures the illogic of arguing against intervention by arguing that other cases also merit intervention. The problem with the hypocrisy charge is that it avoids examining the escalation of events which led to the Arab League's call for a No Fly Zone and then to the implementation of UN resolution 1973. Unlike in other Arab countries, where regimes at

least made a pretence of “understanding” the demand for greater freedom, in Libya there was a blatant demonization of protesters as “rats and cockroaches,” the consequences of which were reflected in a shoot-to-kill policy where anti-aircraft guns and other heavy calibre weapons

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were turned against unarmed civilians. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions, in Libya the regime’s brigades were deployed against the people, and there is evidence that the Libyan government has used mercenaries to wage war against its own people. In such an environment, the militarization of the conflict was inevitable.

The Libyans dreamed briefly about a revolution like the one in Tunisia or Egypt, where we could go out and chant “peaceful, peaceful.” Instead, we went from unarmed demonstrations faced with heavy calibre weapons to forming a ragtag civilian army which was eventually sent by Gaddafi’s brigades into retreat. Our dreams were confronted with Gaddafi’s “alley by alley” (“zenga zenga”) speech. We had to be realistic about our newborn revolution, because it was about to be “cleansed” off the face of the earth. So we adjusted. That optimistic banner in Benghazi that read “no foreign intervention, the Libyan people can manage it alone,” was accompanied by requests for a no fly zone and support from the international community, with Libyans understanding that “no foreign intervention” meant no full-scale ground forces and no occupation of Libya. The current difficulty for many is that unlike the initial coalition, NATO seems to be a compromise, a “light intervention,” crippled by pressure from anti-intervention and pro-intervention nations. Yet what other options do the Libyans have? Those who opposed the initial air-strikes that took out the tanks heading into Benghazi seem to be short on realistic alternatives.

The idea that the Libyans must allow their nascent revolution to be crushed by a brutal regime which had until recently been bolstered by the West rather than accept Western intervention in the hope for a better future seems to me to be based on a short memory. The West has its interests, some on the Left warn, and simultaneously point out that many Western nations have aided the Gaddafi regime. Clearly, those insidious interests did not magically appear with the intervention, and they won’t magically disappear after it. By intervening, nations are acting in their own strategic interest and banking on new deals, but the truth is that many Western governments could easily have looked the other way and continued benefiting from their deals with the Gaddafi regime.

**Poisonous Division**

What poisons the revolution is not Western interests – these are facts on the ground and play out in every single country in the region. What poisons the revolution is division, and the rhetoric that fosters division, exemplified in the idea that the intervention in Libya could poison the Arab Spring. This begs the question: if Gaddafi had succeeded in crushing the uprising in Libya, what effect would that have had on the Arab Spring? To dictatorial regimes across the Arab world looking for a way to counter the growing demands of their people for greater freedom, some method might have been detected in Gaddafi’s madness.

With what is now being defined as a stalemate on the ground, the question of the future of Libya has been pushed to the forefront. The challenges ahead, beginning with finding a way out of the stalemate, are formidable and complex. No one can predict the future, but if fears over a post-Gaddafi Libya raise valid and important concerns, the fact that it will be a long and difficult process to build a democratic society after forty-two years of an oppressive autocratic regime should not be an argument against supporting fledgling efforts to build that society.