

ANALYSIS

# Libya: Nothing humanitarian about U.S. intervention

Tuesday 22 March 2011, by [ARABIA Tom](#), [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2011).

**The claims of Western governments that their war on Libya is “protecting civilians” is a cover for pursuing imperial interests, write Eric Ruder and Tom Arabia.**

WORLD LEADERS and their defenders in the mainstream press are praising the West’s “decisive” military action against Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi, but as the long record of “humanitarian” intervention demonstrates, the governments with the ability to use force in Libya have aims and strategies that will not serve the Libyans they are supposedly there to help.

The supposed aim of the Western assault in Libya is to defend the rebellion against Qaddafi’s regime, which began in the northeastern region of the country and seemed in mid-February to be on the verge of toppling the dictator. But the regime used its overwhelming military force to counter-attack—currently, forces loyal to Qaddafi are already inside the city of Benghazi, a stronghold of the rebels, and more are positioned on the its outskirts.

The *Financial Times*’ March 20 editorial [[1](#)] celebrated the swift approval of the use of force by the UN Security Council and quick deployment of American, British and French warplanes into Libyan airspace:

*“The attacks are justified. Responding instantly to the resolution, the Libyan regime announced a ceasefire and said it would comply with UN demands. It plainly had no intention of doing so. It pressed on with its attacks against rebel-held areas. The international coalition turned to force, and was right to.”*

But posing the issue in this way evades the direct responsibility of the U.S., Britain, France and Italy for the current crisis. All these powers actively promoted, armed and cut deals with the Libyan dictator in recent years—right up until a few weeks ago.

Most media reports now describe Qaddafi as a long-time nemesis of U.S. foreign policy-makers. But this flushes down the memory hole more than a decade, in which the Bush and then Obama administrations viewed Qaddafi as a madman-turned-ally and an essential component of the U.S. “global war on terror.”

**CONCERNED THAT** a dominant role for the U.S. in the assault would look like a replay of the war on Iraq that began almost exactly eight years ago to the day, the U.S. publicly insisted that British and French forces were taking the lead, while the U.S. stuck to a role of “command and control.”

“We did not lead this,” said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [[2](#)]. “We did not engage in unilateral actions in any way, but we strongly support the international community taking action against governments and leaders who behave as Qaddafi is unfortunately doing so now.”

But in the opening air and missile strikes, U.S. Tomahawk missiles delivered most of the destructive force. And it was the U.S. that played the key role in coaxing the “international community” into agreeing to military intervention.

As the *New York Times* reported [3]:

*“Hillary and [U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations] Susan Rice were key parts of this story because Hillary got the Arab buy-in, and Susan worked the UN to get a 10-to-5 vote, which is no easy thing,” said Brian Katulis, a national security expert with the Center for American Progress, a liberal group with close ties to the administration...*

South Africa and Nigeria—along with Brazil and India—had all initially balked at authorizing force, but administration officials believed they had brought the Africans around. Mr. Obama had already been on the phone pressing President Jacob Zuma of South Africa to support the resolution, White House officials said. Eventually, the South African representative showed up to vote yes, as did the Nigerian representative, giving the United States one vote more than required."

Once the Arab League signed on in favor of a no-fly zone over Libya, the U.S. decided it had enough international support to back the UN resolution, which authorizes not just the no-fly zone, but “all necessary measures”—a phrase so open-ended that it could be used to justify almost anything, including a ground invasion.

This “mission creep” is typical in the history of so-called “humanitarian interventions,” from Somalia to Kosovo to Iraq, as the focus shifts from addressing an immediate crisis to achieving the longer-term goals of the most powerful governments, especially the U.S.

Anyone who buys current U.S. claims about its mission in Libya needs to look closely at the history of past interventions, where stopping even an “immediate crisis” proved beyond the capabilities of the U.S.

For example, in the early 1990s in Somalia, the U.S. sent troops in the name of helping to distribute aid to a famine-stricken population. But within months, the mission shifted from providing food to intervening in a conflict between rival warlords. The presence of the U.S. military made it harder to distribute food aid. By the time the U.S. was driven from the country, its soldiers had killed or wounded more than 10,000 Somalis.

Similarly, when NATO, led by the U.S., began bombing Serbia in 1999, President Slobodan Milosevic intensified his ground operations, and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo paid with their lives.

Qaddafi is hoping to do something similar in Libya, and U.S. and European bombs are giving him an aura of legitimacy he couldn't have claimed a week ago—by allowing him to act as if he is a staunch opponent of Western intervention in North Africa.

**MEDIA ACCOUNTS** of the first days of the war showed Libyan opponents of Qaddafi in Benghazi celebrating the news that the Western powers would act against tanks, troops and planes loyal to the regime. An exodus of people from Benghazi, ahead of Qaddafi's threatened assault, halted and reversed.

This isn't a surprise given the violence of the Libyan regime in its previous attacks on rebel-held cities on the one hand—and the deceptive effectiveness of U.S. air attacks in halting the regime's advance. Most people facing the bombs of the Qaddafi government will have been happy to see that bombardment stopped or slowed, no matter how.

But there is a wider framework to consider, and this is where it is important to remember the experience of Iraq.

When the U.S. carried out its invasion in 2003, crowds of Iraqis thanked U.S. troops for getting rid of Saddam Hussein's despised dictatorship. But the hopes that the end of Saddam Hussein's rule signaled a new dawn for Iraq evaporated when the U.S. stood by while looters plunged the country into chaos. After that, Washington's Provisional Coalition Authority acted like the new colonial rulers of Iraq—and when the occupation faced a growing resistance, the U.S. encouraged sectarian rivalry, which ultimately ripped the country apart.

Qaddafi is in a stronger position than Saddam—troops loyal to the regime that have already entered rebel-held areas will be difficult to remove without significant civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, the U.S. will extract a price for its commitment of military resources, using it as leverage to win the support of currents within the opposition willing to serve U.S. interests—while the war goes on, under a new pro-U.S. Libyan government after Qaddafi, or some other outcome.

The diverse groups that make up the Libyan resistance are already jockeying with one another, and it's hardly surprising that those who defected from Qaddafi's inner circle have emerged to vie for control of the rebel forces. The U.S. has extensive experience co-opting radical and revolutionary movements, diverting them into safe channels of "democracy," "free markets" and partnership with U.S. foreign policy.

Ultimately, "humanitarian intervention" is a cover for pursuing imperial interests.

To take an obvious example, when Israel spent three weeks pummeling Gaza's 1.5 million residents, there was never any talk among U.S. political leaders about "stopping a massacre" or "protecting civilians from a deranged dictator." That's because unflinching support for Israel's war on Palestinians is part of the long-term objective of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

In Libya, military intervention is consistent with economic and strategic interests. Economically, Libya has significant oil reserves. Already, British and Italian oil companies have a stake in the country, and protecting those investments is an important objective. Before this, France, a former colonial power in North Africa, had been frozen out of Libya's oil sector. When some leaders of Libya's resistance went on a tour of European capitals looking for support, France was the first to pledge its backing [\[4\]](#), with the aim of getting a cut of the action after Qaddafi goes.

Strategically, Libya has become the central question in the wave of revolts in North Africa and the Middle East that has already swept two U.S.-backed dictators from power.

In Tunisia and Egypt, massive mobilizations were successful in toppling the dictators. Now, the combined effect of Qaddafi's ruthless assault on rebel forces, similar brutality by the autocratic regimes of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (which the U.S. has barely criticized, much less gone to war against), and direct military intervention have allowed the U.S. an opportunity to try to get some grip on developments.

A pro-U.S. regime in Libya—or a pro-U.S. regime in the eastern half of a partitioned country—would slow the tide of democratic revolts taking place across the region, especially if it seems that the likely outcome of a rebellion is the recreation of pro-U.S. puppet regimes.

Thus, Western intervention may appear to slow Qaddafi's advance, but it's really designed to halt the Arab rebellion. That's why it will be important for those who support the popular uprisings in the Arab world to oppose the West's war on Libya. The people of Libya and the wider region deserve to

live free of dictatorships, but also of the dominance and oppression of U.S. imperialism.

---

## **P.S.**

\* From Socialist Worker:

<http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/21/nothing-humanitarian-about-us-intervention>

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/6dc5186e-532a-11e0-86e6-00144feab49a,Authorised=false.html?\\_i\\_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2F6dc5186e-532a-11e0-86e6-00144feab49a.html&\\_i\\_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fsocialistworker.org%2F2011%2F03%2F21%2Fnothing-humanitarian-about-us-intervention](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/6dc5186e-532a-11e0-86e6-00144feab49a,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2F6dc5186e-532a-11e0-86e6-00144feab49a.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fsocialistworker.org%2F2011%2F03%2F21%2Fnothing-humanitarian-about-us-intervention)

[2] [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/world/africa/20libya.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/world/africa/20libya.html?_r=1)

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html>

[4] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110307-libyas-opposition-leadership-comes-focus>