

Libya: An Old-Fashioned Colonial Smash-and-Grab

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Who can argue with a straight face that UN Resolution 1973, passed on March 17, permits efforts to assassinate Qaddafi by bombs and missiles or escalations in the arsenal of regime change, such as the deployment of British Apache helicopters? A hundred years from now this UN/NATO intervention will be seen as an old-fashioned colonial smash-and-grab affair, tricked out with trumpery nonsense about a mission “to protect civilians and civilian populated areas” as hollow as the old imperialists’ claims that the conquest of India was primarily about saving widows from suttee.

In the past few weeks we have had amply documented records of ferocious repression across the Middle East. There are body counts and vivid reports out of Syria. The violence that finally prompted President Saleh’s flight from Yemen to Saudi Arabia was relayed in graphic reportage.

Admittedly, the US press has been less energetic in relaying the savageries being inflicted on erstwhile democracy seekers in Bahrain, thus reflecting the desire of President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton that the topic not be mentioned. Whereas “Libya” appears at least fourteen times in the three major declarations issued at the recent G-8 summit in Deauville, France, and “Syria” twelve times, “Bahrain” appears not at all.

Contrast these detailed reports with the amazing vagueness of news stories coming out of Libya. Here, remember, we have a regime accused in Resolution 1973 of “widespread and systematic attacks...against the civilian population [that] may amount to crimes against humanity.” We have a press corps and insurgents ready and eager to report anything discreditable to the Qaddafi regime.

Yet since mid-February the reporting out of Libya has had a striking lack of persuasive documentation of butcheries or abuses commensurate with the language lavished on the regime’s presumptive conduct. Though human rights groups have furnished some detailed accounts of specific repressions, time and again one reads vague phrases like “thousands reportedly killed by Qaddafi’s mercenaries” or Qaddafi “massacring his own people,” delivered without the slightest effort to furnish supporting evidence. This is not said out of any singular respect for Qaddafi. But it was the secondhand allegation of massacres that drove both news coverage and UN activities—particularly in the early stage, when UN Resolution 1970 was adopted, calling for sanctions and the referral of Qaddafi’s closest circle to the International Criminal Court.

News reports in mid-March, such as those by McClatchy reporters Jonathan Landay, Warren Strobel and Shashank Bengali, contain no claims of anything approaching a “crime against humanity,” the allegation in Resolution 1973. Yet by February 23 the propaganda blitz was in full spate, with Clinton denouncing Qaddafi and Reagan’s “mad dog of the Middle East” exhumed as the preferred way of describing the Libyan leader.

The UN commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay, started denouncing the Libyan government as early as February 18; UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon joined Pillay on February 21. The UN News Center reported that Ban was “outraged at press reports that the Libyan authorities have been firing at demonstrators from war planes and helicopters” (my italics). On this kind of basis the

Security Council's February 22 session, devoted to "Peace and Security in Africa," became instead devoted to denouncing Libya. In these early days, no one who represented the Libyan government was permitted to address the council. Only defectors speaking on behalf of Libya were given the floor.

Now remember that on March 10, French President Sarkozy, a major player in NATO's coalition of the willing against Libya, declared the Libyan National Transition Council the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people. So Qaddafi was facing a formal armed insurrection—not a protest movement demanding "democracy"—led by a shadowy entity based in Benghazi, one of whose more diligent enterprises appears to have been the establishment of a "central bank." Seven days later, Resolution 1973 made clear that attempts to suppress this insurrection would elicit armed intervention by NATO.

NATO says it has flown more than 3,000 missions, and it is clear that despite the Benghazi rebels' pretensions and effusive coverage in the NATO powers' homelands, the rebels have been unable to make any effective military showing. In other words, the only serious challenge to Qaddafi is a pirate coalition of NATO forces operating without the slightest mandate in international law, currently engaged in bombing a major city—Tripoli—filled with civilians. The indifference of the Western press, not to mention the liberal/left in the United States, to these obvious facts has emboldened the coalition to ever more brazen affronts to law, with bluff calls from British generals amid the embarrassing stalemate to cut the cackle and send in the troops.

America's clients in Bahrain and Riyadh can watch the undignified pantomime with a tranquil heart, welcoming this splendid demonstration that they have nothing to fear from Obama's fine speeches or Clinton's references to democratic aspirations, well aware that NATO's warplanes and helicopters are operating under the usual double standard—with the Western press furnishing all appropriate services.

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P.S.

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