

“No to intervention! Just leave it to the Libyan people”

THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR IN LIBYA is, like all wars, entirely unpredictable. Similarly, its aftermath is entirely unpredictable. However, we can be reasonably certain that Libya will not be a functioning liberal democracy anytime soon. The reason for this is rooted in the nature of the Libyan state, its economy, and its social structure. The leaders of France, Britain, and the United States are well aware of this, which is why they have predicated their intervention on the “protection of civilians” rather than the establishment of democracy, which, of course, has never motivated their policy or military interventions in North Africa, or in the Arab world.

So the reason the Western powers have become involved is twofold: firstly, it is to protect what they regard as their vital national interests in the Maghreb and in Arabia more generally; secondly, it is to protect the civilian population from Gaddafi’s bloody retribution.

The powers were prepared to treat with Muammar Gaddafi’s regime for as long as he foreswore terrorism, for as long as he kept his interference with the affairs of his neighbours (and those of Central and East Africa), to an absolute minimum; for as long as he stopped trying to acquire nuclear technology; for as long as he kept Islamism at bay, and finally, for as long as he maintained stability between the patchwork of tribal entities which make up Libya. As long as he did all this, everybody from Tony Blair to Hilary Clinton was prepared to greet the old psychopath with kisses, and say nice words about him, his sons, and his tent. They were pleased to train his riot police, sell him arms, and guarantee financial confidentiality, and diplomatic immunity, for him and his family.

However, in the context of the overthrow of Tunisian

dictator, Ben Ali, and of the opening stages of the revolution in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi's regime began to totter. He could no longer guarantee stability throughout his fiefdom. The Islamists in and around the ancient city of Darnah, and the constellation of tribal patriarchs in Eastern Libya who have derived little from Gaddafi's oil revenues, grew restive. These more traditional forces, along with those of the modern professional class, which is fighting for the rule of law and responsible government, began to coalesce into a powerful rebellion. This rebellion, when joined by ministers and officials of the Tripoli government, who had jumped ship, rapidly became an existential threat to Gaddafi's family-state.

The West's reasons for supporting Gaddafi's dictatorship evaporated more or less over night. He could no longer meet his commitments to "the international community" - so, now he is required to leave the stage of history - and, if he won't go quietly, he'll have to be bombed out of power.

Now, as the bombs and rockets fall, as the young men die, and the horrified civilians crouch in terror with their kids, we begin to encounter the chorus of opposition from Western leftwing and liberal circles. "No to Western Intervention!" they cry. "Leave it to the Libyan people Only the Libyan working class can defeat Gaddafi!" These sorts of slogan are defended with three kinds of reasoning. Innocent civilians will be killed by Western military action, the motives of the Western powers are driven by greed for oil, and any military intervention might rapidly spin out of control, simply making a bad situation worse as the war escalates.

It is, of course, true that the Western powers only ever act in their own interests, but this does not mean that their interests, and those of embattled rebels fighting a tyrant, might not coincide for long enough for one side to benefit from the assistance of the other. However, in any war, those trying to avoid the fighting face the danger of being accidentally killed by the rebels and their allies, or intentionally slaughtered by the tyrant. While all those engaged in the fighting face the danger that the war will

widen engulfing many more people than it did at the outset.

In the particular case of Libya the present war had broken out well before the United Nations resolution was debated or passed, and well before the West became directly involved. It is a bitter total war with existential implications for all those involved. Gaddafi, his family, and his principal allies, know that they face victory or death; the rebels will, with certainty, pursue Gaddafi's soldiers and officials "alley by alley, house by house, room by room". They cannot afford to lose. Similarly, the rebels know that defeat or surrender is not an option. They know that they would be hunted down by Gaddafi's forces without exception or mercy. The slightest circumstantial evidence or suspicion of sympathy with the rebels would warrant torture and death at the hands of the regime. Both sides will be as brutal as each other.

However, the rebels are the best chance of Libya being set upon the long road to real open economic development and the kind of political change that will enable Libya to take its first faltering steps towards becoming a law-governed society. In the context of the Arab revolution now unfolding, a Libya without Gaddafi is a precondition for Libya's participation in the changes now afoot in the Arab world. Gaddafi must go.

Consequently, there is a coincidence of interests between Libya's revolutionary forces and the Western powers. This is not an entirely reliable coincidence of interests, nor is it set in stone. But, for now, Western air power is all that stands between the rebels and their annihilation by Gaddafi. This is why the military action of the West should be supported.

The alternative is to rely, as the Western left does, on fantasies about the capacities of "the people" or "the working class". The people, do not, of course, exist, except in the most rhetorical of senses. The Libyan people are, like people in many other countries and nations, a people living in a patchwork of regional loyalties, local fears, interests, and aspirations, which change and move in step with rapidly changing circumstances. Inevitably, they have found it extremely

difficult to mount a consistent resistance or opposition to Gaddafi's family-state and the tyranny it has maintained. Political parties, independent trade unions, free professional bodies, and other institutions, are simply non-existent. In such circumstances older forms of loyalty to family, tribe, and region, can be the only source of support.

Therefore, rhetoric about "the people" and "the working class" is just irresponsible phrase mongering, and radical posturing. In a country with only two large cities and a dozen or so small towns scattered across an enormous land, which is largely desert, sustained urban warfare, or guerilla fighting, is not possible. All armed opposition must immediately face the armour and the air force of the tyrant in Tripoli. Until last Saturday the rebels were utterly exposed to Gaddafi's tanks and aircraft - they simply could not win. Indeed, their defeat was a foregone conclusion. This is why, despite the appalling experience of colonialism and occupation at the hands of the Italians and the British, and the rebels' healthy suspicion of modern Western governments, they called for air attacks upon Gaddafi's armour, his radar and air force, and his command and control centres.

Salwar el-Deghali, of the national transitional council in Benghazi, told *The Guardian's* Chris McGreal: "I'm happy the air strikes have started, but at the same time I'm worried that the international community will not keep up the attacks long enough to remove Gaddafi. There must be more attacks on Gaddafi's forces, and fast. We need these attacks until he is crushed."

The destruction of Gaddafi's regime is a precondition for Libya's participation in the Arab Revolution, if that needs Western air attacks, then so be it. No doubt, the Western powers will chisel away, attempting to turn everything to their own advantage, but sustained resistance to that really will be the job of "the people", "the masses", and "the working class". But first, let's get rid of Muammar Gaddafi.