

NATO's War Crimes in Libya: Who Grieves for the Fallen Heroes?

Written by James Petras
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The conquest and occupation of Libya is first and foremost a *military victory* for NATO. Every aspect of the military offensive was spearheaded and directed by NATO air, sea and ground forces. The NATO invasion of Libya was basically a response to the “Arab spring” : the popular uprisings which spread from North Africa to the Persian Gulf.

Political and military considerations were foremost in motivating the NATO invasion: As late as May 2009, the U.S. and European regimes were developing close bilateral military, economic and security agreements with the Gaddafi regime. According the British daily, the Independent (9/4/2011), official Libyan documents found in its Foreign Office described how on December 16, 2003, the US CIA and British MI6 established close collaboration with the Gaddafi government. The MI6 provided Gaddafi with details on Libyan opposition leaders exiled in England and even drafted a speech for him as he sought rapprochement with the outside world.

The NATO assault *formed part of a general counter-attack* designed to contain and reverse the popular democratic and anti-imperialist movements which had ousted or were on the verge of overthrowing US-client dictators.

U.S. Secretary of State Clinton presented Muammar Gaddafi to the Washington press during a visit in 2009 stating, “*I am very pleased to welcome Minister Gaddafi to the State Department. We deeply value the relationship between the United States and Libya. We have many opportunities to deepen and broaden our co-operation and I am very much looking forward to building on this relationship.*” (examiner.com 2/26/2011).

Between 2004-2010 the largest oil and petroleum service multinational corporations, including British Petroleum, Exxon Mobil, Halliburton, Chevron, Conoco and Marathon Oil joined with

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military-industrial giants like Raytheon and Northrop Grumman, Dow Chemical and Fluor and signed enormous investments and sales deals with Libya (examiner.com op cit).

In 2009, the U.S. State Department awarded a \$1.5 million dollar grant to train Libyan civilian and government security forces. The White House budget for 2012 included a grant for training Libyan security forces. General Dynamics signed a \$165 million dollar deal in 2008 to equip Libya's elite mechanized brigade (*examiner.com* ibi).

On August 24, 2011 Wikileaks released US embassy cables from Tripoli, which described the positive assessment a group of leading Republican senators had made of US-Libyan relations in during their visit in late 2009. These cables highlighted ongoing security training programs involving Gaddafi's police and military, as well as the US' strong support for the regime's repression of radical Islamists, many of whom are now leading the NATO-backed 'rebel forces' now occupying Tripoli.

What caused the NATO countries to shift abruptly from a policy of embracing Gaddafi to launching a brutal scorched-earth invasion of Libya in a matter of months? *The key* is the popular uprisings, which threatened Euro-US domination. The near total destruction of Libya, a secular regime with the highest standard of living in Africa, was meant to be a *lesson*

, a *message*

from the imperialists to the newly aroused masses of North Africa, Asia and Latin America: *The fate of Libya awaits any regime which aspires to greater independence and questions the ascendancy of Euro-American power.*

NATO's savage six-month blitz – over 30,000 air and missile assaults on Libyan civil and military institutions - was a response to those who claimed that the US and the EU were on the "decline" and that the "empire was in decay". The radical Islamist and monarchist-led "uprising" in Benghazi during March 2011 was backed by and served as a pretext for the NATO imperial powers to extend their counter-offensive on the road to *neo-colonial restoration*.

NATO's War and the Phony "Rebel Uprising"

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Nothing is more obvious than the fact that the entire war against Libya was in every strategic and material fashion NATO's war. The casting of the rag-tag collection of monarchists, Islamist fundamentalists, London and Washington-based ex-pats and disaffected Gaddafi officials as "rebels" is a pure case of mass media propaganda. From the beginning the 'rebels' depended completely on the military, political, diplomatic and media power of NATO, without which the de facto mercenaries would not have lasted a month, holed up in Benghazi.

A detailed analysis of the main features of the conquest of Libya confirms this assault as a *NATO war*

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NATO launched brutal air and sea attacks destroying the Libyan air force, ships, energy depots, tanks, artillery and armories and killed and wounded thousands of soldiers, police and civilian militia fighters. Until NATO's invasion the mercenary 'rebel' ground forces had not advanced beyond Benghazi and could barely 'hold' territory afterwards. The 'rebel' mercenaries 'advanced' only behind the withering round-the-clock air attacks of the NATO offensive.

NATO air strikes were responsible for the massive destruction of Libyan civilian and defensive military infrastructure, bombing ports, highways, warehouses, airports, hospitals, electrical and water plants and neighborhood housing, in a war of 'terror' designed to 'turn' the loyalist mass base against the Gaddafi government. The mercenaries did not have popular backing among Libyan civilians, but NATO brutality weakened active opposition against the 'rebel' mercenaries.

NATO won key diplomatic support for the invasion by securing UN resolutions, mobilizing their client rulers in the Arab League, procuring US mercenary trained 'legionnaires' from Qatar and the financial backing of the rich rabble in the Gulf. NATO forced 'cohesion' among the feuding clans of self-appointed 'rebel' mercenary leaders via its ("freezing") seizure of overseas Libyan government assets amounting to billions of dollars. Thus the financing, arming, training and advising by "Special Forces" were all under NATO control.

NATO imposed economic sanctions, cutting off Libya's income from oil sales.. NATO ran an intensive propaganda campaign parading the imperial offensive as a "rebel uprising"; disguising the blistering bombardment of a defenseless anti-colonial army as 'humanitarian intervention' in defense of 'pro-democracy civilians'. The centrally choreographed mass media blitz extended far beyond the usual liberal circles, to convince 'progressive' journalists and their

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newspapers, as well as intellectuals to paint the imperial mercenaries as 'rebels' and to condemn the heroic 6-month resistance of the Libyan army and people against foreign aggression. The pathologically racist Euro-US propaganda published lurid images of Libyan government troops (often portrayed as 'black mercenaries') receiving massive quantities of 'Viagra' from Gadhafi while their own families and homes were, in fact, under aerial assault and blockade by NATO.

The main contribution of the mercenary 'conquerors' in this grand production was to provide photo opportunities of rag-tag 'rebels' waving rifles in Pentagon-style Che Guevara poses riding around in pickup trucks arresting and brutalizing African migrant workers and black Libyans. The mercenary 'liberators' triumphantly entered Libyan cities and towns, which were already scorched and devastated by the NATO colonial air force. Needless to say the mass media 'adored' them.

In the aftermath of NATO's destruction, the 'rebel' mercenaries showed their true talents as death squads: They organized the systematic execution of "suspected Gadhafi supporters" and the pillage of homes, stores, banks and public institutions related to the defeated regime. To "secure" Tripoli and snuff out any expression of anti-colonial resistance, the 'rebel' mercenaries carry out summary executions – especially of black Libyans and sub-Saharan African workers and their families. The "chaos" in Tripoli described by the mass media is due to the 'self-styled liberation' forces running amok. The only quasi-organized forces in Tripoli appear to be the Al Qaeda-linked militants, NATO's erstwhile allies.

Consequences of the NATO Conquest of Libya

According to 'rebel' mercenary technocrats, NATO's policy of systematic destruction will cost Libya at least a 'lost decade'. This is an optimistic assessment of how long 'reconstruction' will take for Libya to regain the economic levels of February 2011. The major petroleum companies have already lost hundreds of millions in profits and over the decade are expected to lose billions more due to the flight, assassination and jailing of thousands of experienced Libyan and foreign experts, skilled immigrant workers and technical specialists in all fields, especially in view of the destruction of Libyan infrastructure and telecommunication systems.

Sub-Sahara Africa will suffer a huge set-back with the cancellation of the proposed 'Bank of Africa', which Gaddafi was developing as an alternative source of investment finance and the destruction of his alternative communication system for Africa. The process of re-colonization

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involving imperial rule via NATO and UN mercenary 'peace keepers' will be chaotic given the inevitable strife among hostile armed Islamist fundamentalists, monarchists, neo-colonial technocrats, tribal warlords and clans as they carve up their private fiefdoms. Intra-imperial rivalries and local political claimants to the oil wealth will further enhance the 'chaos' and degrade civilian life, in a nation which had once boasted the highest per capita income and standard of living in Africa. Complex irrigation and petroleum networks, developed under Gaddafi and destroyed by NATO, will remain in shambles. As the example of Iraq has vividly proven, NATO is better at destroying than constructing a modern secular state rooted in a modern civil bureaucracy, universal free public education, secular judicial system and modern health services. The US policy of rule and ruin reigns supreme in NATO's juggernaut.

Motivation for the Invasion

What motivated NATO to initiate a massive, six-month long aerial bombardment of Libya, followed by invasion and crimes against humanity? Civilian deaths and the widespread destruction of Libyan civil society by NATO flies in the face of its claims that the air assaults were meant to "protect civilians" from imminent Gaddafi-led genocide, 'rebel' claims which were never substantiated. Bombing Libya's critical economic infrastructure allows us to categorically conclude that the NATO assault has little to do with 'economic rationality' or any such consideration. The primary motivation for NATO's actions can be found in earlier policies related to a spring counter-offensive against the mass popular movements that overthrew US-EU puppets in Egypt and Tunisia and were threatening client regimes in Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere.

Despite the fact that the US-NATO were already engaged in several colonial wars (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia) and Western public opinion had been demanding withdrawal in light of the costs, Western imperial leaders felt too much was at stake and calculated that losses could be minimized. NATO's overwhelming mastery of the air and sea made short work of Libya's puny military defense capability, allowing them to bomb the cities, ports and vital infrastructure with impunity and enforce a total economic blockade. They calculated that massive bombing would terrorize the Libyan people into submission and bring about a quick colonial victory without any NATO military losses, the prime concern of Western public opinion, and permit a triumphant 'rebel' mercenary army to march into Tripoli.

The Arab popular rebellions were the central concern and the motor force behind NATO's destruction of Libya. These mass popular uprisings had toppled the long-standing pillars of US-Israel-EU dominance in the Middle East. The fall of the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak and his Tunisian counterpart Ben Ali sent tremors through the imperial foreign offices. These

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successful uprisings had the immediate ripple effect of inspiring similar movements throughout the region. Bahrain, housing the key naval base for the US navy in the Middle East and neighboring Saudi Arabia (the US key strategic ally in the Arab world), witnessed a prolonged massive uprising of civil society, while Yemen ruled by the US-puppet Ali Saleh, faced mass popular movements and militant resistance. Morocco and Algeria were experiencing popular demands for democracy. The common thread in the Arab peoples' movements was their demands to end EU, US and Israeli domination of the region, an end to massive corruption and nepotism, free elections and a solution to wide-spread unemployment via large-scale job programs. As anti-colonial movements grew in breadth and intensity their demands radicalized from political to social democracy, from a democratic to an anti-imperialist foreign policy. Workers' demands were enforced by strikes and calls for the prosecution of repressive police and internal security and military officials guilty of crimes against their citizens.

The U.S., E.U. and Israel were caught by surprise – their intelligence agencies so deeply embedded in the smelly crevices of their clients' secret police institutions failed to detect the popular explosions. The popular uprisings came at a critical and inopportune moment, especially for the US where domestic support for NATO wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had declined sharply given the economic crises and major social cutbacks to pay for these wars. Moreover, in Iraq and Afghanistan the US-NATO troops were losing ground: The Taliban was, in effect, the real 'shadow government'. Pakistan, despite its puppet regime and compliant generals, faced overwhelming popular opposition to the air war against its citizens in frontier villages and towns. The US drone strikes killing militants and civilians were answered with the sabotage of vital transport supplying the occupation forces in Afghanistan. Faced with the deteriorating global situation, the NATO powers, decided that they needed to counter-attack in the most decisive and visible manner by destroying an independent, secular regime like Libya and thereby re-affirming their global supremacy, countering the image of defeat and retreat and, above all, re-energizing the "declining imperial power".

The Imperial Counter-Attack

The US led the way in its counter-offensive in Egypt, by backing the power grab by the military junta led by Mubarak loyalists, who then proceeded to disperse and repress the pro-democracy and workers movements and to end all talk of restructuring the economy. A pro-NATO collective dictatorship of generals replaced the personal autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak. The NATO powers provided "emergency" billions to float the new regime and 'derail' the Egyptian people's march to democracy. In Tunisia a similar process took hold: The EU, especially France and the US, backed a reshuffling of the ousted regime bringing to the fore a new/old cast of neo-colonial politicians. They plied them with funds, insuring that the military-police apparatus remained intact despite continued mass discontent with the conformist policies of the 'new/old regime.

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In Bahrain and Yemen, the NATO powers followed a dual track, unsure of the outcome between the massive pro-democracy movements and the pro-imperial autocrats. In Bahrain, the West called for 'reform' and 'dialogue' with the majority Shia population and a peaceful resolution, while continuing to arm and protect the Bahraini royalty – all the while looking for a pliant alternative if the incumbent puppet was overthrown. The NATO-backed Saudi invasion of Bahrain in support of the dictatorship and the subsequent wave of terror effectively showed West's true intentions. In Yemen the NATO powers continued to support the brutal Ali Saleh regime.

Meanwhile the NATO powers were exploiting internal discontent in Syria by arming and providing diplomatic support to the Islamic fundamentalists and their minority neo-liberal allies in an effort to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime. Thousands of Syrian civilians, police and soldiers have been killed in this simmering civil war, which NATO propaganda presents as a case of state terror against 'peaceful civilians', ignoring the killing of soldiers and civilians by armed Islamists and the very real threat to Syria's secular population and religious minorities.

The Counter-Offensive and NATO's Invasion of Libya

The destruction and invasion of Libya reversed seven years of accommodation and co-operation with Gaddafi. There were no 'incidents' in Libya or elsewhere that had threatened the NATO countries' economic and military interests. Libya was still an independent country, pursuing a pro-African agenda which had spearheaded and funded the establishment of an independent regional bank and communications system designed to bypass IMF and World Bank control. Libya's close ties to all the major NATO oil companies and to Wall Street investment banks as well as its ongoing bilateral military programs with the US did not shield it from the NATO's attack. Libya was deliberately destroyed by a 6-month campaign of relentless bombing by NATO air and naval forces to serve as an example to the Arab popular movements: NATO's message to the Arab pro-democracy movements was that it was prepared to launch new offensive wars with the same devastating consequences as the Libyan people just endured; the imperial powers were not in decline and any independent anti-colonial regime would suffer the same fate. NATO's message to the African Union was clear: There will be no independent regional bank organized by Gaddafi or anyone else. There is no alternative to imperial banks, the IMF or the World Bank.

Through the devastation of Libya, the West was telling the Third World that, contrary to the pundits who chattered about 'the decline of the US empire', NATO was willing to use

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overwhelming and genocidal military power to establish puppet regimes, no matter how backward, vicious and regressive the puppets, because they will ultimately obey NATO and answer to the White House.

NATO's invasion and destruction of a secular modern republic, like Libya, which had used its oil wealth to develop Libyan society, was a stern message to democratic popular movements. Any independent Third World regime can be rolled back; colonial puppet regimes can be foisted onto a devastated people; the end of colonialism is not inevitable, imperial rule is back.

NATO's invasion of Libya sends a message to freedom fighters everywhere: There is a high cost to independence; acting outside of imperial channels, even if only to a limited degree, can bring swift destruction. Moreover, the NATO war on Libya demonstrates to all nationalist regimes that *making concessions* to Western economic, political and military interests— as Gaddafi's sons and their neo-liberal entourage had pursued full accommodation—does not offer security. In fact concessions may have *encouraged imperial penetration*

. The West's burgeoning ties with Libyan officials facilitated their defections and promised an easy victory over Tripoli. The NATO powers believed that with a regional uprising in Benghazi, a handful of defectors from the Gaddafi regime and their military control of the air and sea, Libya would be an easy victory on the way to a widespread *rollback of the Arab Spring*

The “cover” of an orchestrated regional military-civilian “uprising” and the imperial mass media propaganda blitz against the Libyan government was sufficient to convince the majority of western leftist intellectuals to take up the cudgels for the mercenary ‘rebels’: Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, Lowy, Juan Cole and many others backed the mercenary “rebels” ... demonstrating the irrelevance and bankruptcy of the remnants of the old left.

The Long Term, Large Scale Consequences of NATO's War

The invasion and conquest of Libya marks a new phase in Western imperialism's drive to reassert its primacy in the Arab-Islamic world. The ongoing offensive is clearly evident in the mounting pressures, sanctions, and arming of the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad, the ongoing consolidation of the Egyptian military junta and the demobilization of the pro-democracy movement in Tunisia. How far “backwards” the process can be pushed

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depends on the revitalization and regrouping of the pro-democracy movements, currently in ebb.

Unfortunately, NATO's victory over Libya will strengthen the arguments of the militarist wings of the US and EU ruling class who claim that the 'military option' brings results, that the only policy that "the anti-colonial Arabs" understand is force. The Libyan outcome will strengthen the hand of policymakers who favor a continued long-term US-NATO presence in Iraq and Afghanistan and promote a military offensive against Iran and Syria. Israel has already capitalized on NATO's victory against Gaddafi via its expansion of huge colonial settlements in the West Bank, increasing bombing and missile raids on Gaza, a major naval and army build-up in the Red Sea region adjoining Egypt and confrontational posturing toward Turkey.

As of early September, members of the African Union, especially South Africa, have yet to recognize the mercenary "transition" regime imposed by NATO on Libya. Aside from the Libyan people, Sub-Saharan Africa will be the biggest immediate loser in the overthrow of Gaddafi. Libya's generous aid, grants and loans, bought the African states a degree of independence from the harsh conditions of the IMF, World Bank and Western bankers. Gaddafi was a major sponsor and backer of regional integration – including the African Union. His large scale development programs, especially oil and water infrastructure and construction projects, employed hundreds of thousands of sub-Saharan African immigrant workers and specialists who remitted billions to their home countries, helping the balance of payments and reducing deficits and poverty at home. In place of Gaddafi's positive economic contribution, Africa now faces Tripoli transformed into a colonial outpost, fortifying US military command in Africa and a new push to strengthen military ties with the empire.

However, beyond the present-day celebrations of their imperial military success in Libya, the war only exacerbates the weakening of Western economies by diverting scarce domestic resources to wage prolonged wars with no decisive victories. Ongoing social cuts and harsh austerity programs have undercut any ruling class efforts to whip up phony mass chauvinist celebrations for "democratic victories over tyrants". The naked aggression against Libya has heightened Russian, Chinese and Venezuelan security concerns. Russia and China will veto any UN Security Council sanctions on Syria. Venezuela and Russia are signing new multi-billion dollar military co-operation agreements, strengthening Caracas's military defense in the wake of the Libyan invasion.

For all the ruling class and mass media euphoria, the 'win' over Libya, grotesque and criminal in the destruction of Libyan secular society and the ongoing brutalization of black Libyans, does not solve the profound economic crises in the EU-US. It does not affect China's growing

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competitive advantages over its western competitors. It does not end US-Israeli isolation faced with an imminent world-wide recognition of Palestine as an independent state. The absence of left-wing western intellectual solidarity for independent Third World nations, evident in their support for the imperial-based mercenary "rebels" is more than compensated by the emergence of a radical new generation of left-wing activists in South Africa, Chile, Greece, Spain, Egypt, Pakistan and elsewhere. These are youth, whose solidarity with anti-colonial regimes is based on their own experience with exploitation, "marginalization" (unemployment) and repression at home.

Is it too much to hope that a War Crimes Tribunal could be organized to prosecute NATO leaders for crimes against humanity, for genocide against the people of Libya? Can the brutal link between costly imperial wars abroad and increasing austerity and domestic decay lead to the revival of an anti-imperialist peace movement based on withdrawal of imperial troops abroad and public domestic investments for jobs, health and education for the working and middle class?

If the destruction and occupation of Libya marks a time of infamy for the NATO powers, it also establishes a new awareness that a people can struggle and resist 6 months of intense, massive bombings from all the NATO powers. Perhaps when their heroic example becomes clear and the fog of media propaganda is lifted, a new emerging generation of fighters can vindicate the battle of Libya, as a continuation of the struggle for the definitive emancipation of the Afro-Arab and Islamic peoples from the yoke of Western imperialism.

James Petras is a Bartle Professor (Emeritus) of Sociology at Binghamton University, New York.

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