

Once Again on Libya

April 11, 2011

The basic issue for socialists in confronting the Libyan situation is this: we wish Qaddafi to be defeated, but we are not indifferent to who defeats him. That is because who defeats Qaddafi involves how the regime is brought down and the consequences of that downfall. We are not in support of capitalist imperialism being the agent of that defeat, even though almost any conceivable regime that replaces Qaddafi would most likely be a “lesser evil” to this, one of the world’s most horrific police states.

It follows that any alternative that imperialism would summarily impose on the Libyan people would subordinate the ability of that nation to fully exercise their freedom to develop to the needs of capitalist accumulation. That is also why we refuse to endorse any imperialist lashup, such as resulted in Iraq or Afghanistan or which imperialists may be cooking up for Iran. These are obscene regimes, but we cannot condone actions which would replace one exploiter with another under the guise of “promoting democracy” or “humanitarian interests.” We do not, in more general terms, recognize — much less endorse — the moral or political legitimacy of one set of exploiters and oppressors to selectively displace another under whatever clever packaging imperialists currently employ to market their ambitions.

How then do we apply these principles to a situation in which freedom fighters, heavily outgunned and struggling simply to survive, ask — in desperation — for a limited imperialist intervention on an “enemy of my enemy” basis, as opposed to offering a quid pro quo? How do we distinguish our response when imperialists are asked by a legitimate leadership group for limited assistance from those unilateral interventions in which these same imperialists simply arrogate to themselves the unquestioned right to impose their will, unchecked and unqualified, by a legitimate oppositional democratic force?

Historically, socialists have distinguished between calling upon their own capitalist governments to give arms and aid to insurgencies that we support and the right of these insurgencies to arm themselves through whatever channels they can establish, *even with imperialist powers*. We reject the first alternative because it entails taking *responsibility* for involving imperialism in the conflict. Were we to do that, we would also have to accede in how imperialism chooses to provide this aid and to accept as legitimate the advantages imperialism seeks to attain through its involvement.

Conversely, we accept the latter proposition in deference to the unchallenged right of all embattled democratic forces — including those fighting under authoritarian or bourgeois leaderships whose victory nevertheless does not foreclose broader democratic openings — to seek an edge wherever they can find it.

The Irish rebels of 1916, according to third camp lore, accepted aid from German imperialism. If that were true, no revolutionist would have questioned the right of the Irish rebels to accept such arms, which the German government offered for its own reasons. That is, it would have been unchallenged as long as no strings were attached. Needless to say, this did not mean that Liebknecht and Luxemburg were called upon to request this aid from the Kaiser. Similarly, no socialist would have repudiated the right of Hungarian revolutionaries in 1956 from calling for aid from anywhere they could get it, including the Western powers. This did not oblige American socialists to ask Eisenhower and the CIA, not to mention the American military to intervene on Hungary’s behalf. The point is not our attitude towards the revolution, but our attitude toward our own imperialist government. We cannot raise demands that we cannot support.

Along these lines, American socialists supported the call to lift the arms embargo on the Spanish loyalists during the civil war, while refusing to ask our government to send arms to the republicans.

The capitalist democracies famously refused to answer the call from the Spanish democracy. Had they done so, the capitalists would have been free to choose who among the rebels to privilege, what arms to furnish, the schedule of deliveries they would adhere to, as well as the political terms around which they were willing to premise their aid. The desperation of the loyalists would have provided imperialism with a powerful set of tools to exact concessions from the rebels. Needless to say, we socialists would have advised the revolutionists, that unless they — like the Irish rebels of 1916 — could accept such aid as democratic imperialism was willing to offer without making a political deal in exchange, they would have our full support.

But what if an insurgency is unable to satisfy these terms? How then would we gauge our response? What if “an enemy of our enemy” basis is insufficient and imperialism seeks concrete concessions, or seeks to shape outcomes or exploits openings to burnish its image?

This is the crux of our dilemma with the Libyan situation. Up until now we have been successfully spared this conundrum. But that is also our problem. There are no obvious historical precedents to guide us, no historical lessons upon which we can draw. The imperial powers stated, in essence, that they would not release Qaddafi’s funds to the rebels, nor would they relax the arms embargo to the advantage of the democrats. They refused, in effect, to engage the rebels on an “enemy of our enemy” basis. Otherwise it would have been a matter of indifference to the West as to how they channeled this aid. The Western powers agreed, however, to answer the desperate call — a call to which the imperialists themselves are deeply implicated for failing to eliminate the embargo — and provide a no fly zone. We do not know what, if any, deals were exacted, but we do know, assuming that an actual NATO ground invasion is out of the question, that this is where the principle danger resides. Otherwise the refusal to lift the embargo remains — if not to exert political pressure or condition outcomes, in no small part, a mystery.

Let us examine a few of the Left responses. Among anti-imperialist fundamentalists, Western aid in the form of direct military intervention at *any* level, either clarifies or redefines the dynamic. For that camp, it is Qaddafi who is seen as fighting an anti-imperialist war. And it is very difficult to understand why this conclusion would have been markedly different had imperialism simply lifted the embargo and either armed or allowed the insurgency to arm itself. It is not the nature of the intervention but the fact of intervention that is crucial to this position.

In its most primitive form, this anti-imperialist fundamentalism entails actively politicking for Qaddafi as a genuine face of Arab independence and dignity. At a step down are those who, recognizing the repugnant nature of the regime, would have socialists extend military, but not political support to the Libyan police state.

A somewhat weaker response along the same lines is the assertion that socialists no longer have a stake in this fight. Neither side, they argue, can any longer be relied upon to advance interests aligned to the needs of the Libyan people. The rebels by their choice of involving imperialism died a moral death and socialists have no obligation to save them from the physical destruction that they brought upon themselves.

All factions of this anti-imperialist fundamentalism would raise the demand for an immediate halt to the imperialist intervention.

These responses are distant enough from the traditions of third camp socialism as to not require any extended response here. This is not to claim that there are no self-identified third campists who

lobby for these positions; only that they are no longer arguing within a tradition that we clearly recognize as our own.

More pertinent are those who do not withhold their support for the insurgency, but would also, and above all else, *actively* intervene to demand an immediate halt to the imperialist enforced no fly zone. They have balled themselves into a knot, insisting incoherently that actions which would cleanse the perceived political stain from the rebels, that restores their unchallenged revolutionary “agency” — even if it results in their certain demise — is an act, not of treachery, but of unvarnished even unparalleled solidarity.

I think there is no escaping the conclusion that more crucial than the success of the rebels, from this vantage, is denying imperialism a platform to influence outcomes or repackage its image.

Perhaps I am being overly generous here. Most of those who make the demand to halt the bombings, but who also claim to support the rebels, have not spelled out why precisely they find one form of imperial intervention and intrusion acceptable — the delivery of arms, while condemning another — the no fly zone. Both forms of intervention are limited. They do not involve an imperialist invasion and the displacement of the rebels to auxiliary status. It is still the rebels who are doing the fighting and dying. The distinction is therefore only rational under the unspoken assumption that an elimination of the arms embargo alone would have signaled a “no strings attached” policy, while the NFZ is indicative of something else entirely.

They have in any case confused themselves with the rebels. Socialists, having complete distrust in the motivations and designs of this intervention, did not call for a no fly zone and did not ask the imperialists to intervene. They are not implicated by the fact that an insurgency that they support did. They — and by that I mean, we — are similarly under no political obligation to call an immediate halt to activities that we did not call for, but which *as things now stand* permit the rebels to regroup, to consolidate and to extend their national alliances. And this is doubly so, if we have no viable alternative to offer.

We would not of necessity call a halt to the delivery of arms if the embargo had been lifted and imperialism had exercised its leverage through means of extortion on that basis, as it might equally have, the semi-apocryphal case of Ireland notwithstanding. And we need not do so now. *The rebels have opened the door to the imperialists to shape the conflict, but not wide enough to determine and dictate the outcome.* If we accept that proposition, as I do, then we are under no obligation to politically sabotage actions, from whatever source, that may permit the rebels a slim chance of military victory, and therefore, the hope for democracy. If we do not accept that proposition, if we believe that imperialism is now in complete control, we have no further justification for continuing to support the rebellion. Political choices seldom conveniently present themselves in black and white. It is through the murky grayness that we have to feel our way to creative alternatives.

That does not compel us to deny the real dangers that victory under such circumstances portends. This may be uncharted territory, but it is also the terrain in which the issue of revolutionary solidarity — of socialist internationalism — is decisive. We need, first, to forthrightly denounce the pretensions under which this intervention was undertaken. We must be clear that it has nothing to do with humanitarian interests and everything to do with establishing some level of imperialist credibility with the Arab masses in revolt. We can say in advance that we reject any imperialist mediation in the struggle and insist that this, should it come to a question of mediation, only be carried out under the auspices of regional elements sensitive to democracy such as NGOs from Tunisia and Egypt might provide.

Beyond that, it is our duty to proclaim that any concessions made to imperialism in exchange for

the no fly zone, were made under duress and cannot be seen as a binding quid pro quo on any future Libyan government. We will do our best to expose these conditions as we become aware of them and will fight along with honest Libyan democrats and socialists to nullify them. If economic concessions were demanded, we will fight our ruling class, with whatever meager political resources we can muster, to annul them. If political concessions in the form of future alliances or military bases are expected, we will dedicate our assistance in breaking them. If imperialism seeks to raise the Karzais and the Chalabis from the nether ranks of the insurgency and impose them on the Libyan nation, we will mount a campaign to expose this for the democratic fraud it is and mobilize domestic and international opinion against it.

What I advocate here is that socialists show our support for the Libyan insurgency by actively fighting for the conditions under which a democratic foreign policy can be domestically understood and raise these issues in a way that clearly distinguished our position from the simple America first-ism of anti-war liberalism and the confused anti-imperialism of the “halt the bombings now” stripe. The point is to make our case to the vast majority of Americans who have no stake in the preservation of imperialism and do so in a manner commensurate with the aim of relocating them from the camp of dismissive cynics of Arab struggles to the camp of engaged allies of a democratic Libya and Arab East.