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The Libyan catastrophe

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29 July 2014

This weekend's panicked evacuation of US diplomatic staff from Tripoli, Libya to nearby Tunisia is the culmination of the disaster unleashed by the US-NATO war in Libya three years ago.

The fighting in the Libyan capital between rival militias was so intense that US officials did not dare fly out from the nearby Tripoli airport. Instead, the diplomats and their heavily armed Marine guards fled overland, in a caravan of buses and sport utility vehicles. Drones and jet fighters flew overhead and a destroyer cruised offshore, ready to blow up anyone who got in their way.

Washington and the other imperialist powers armed these same militias in 2011 as part of a war for regime change to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. They left behind a country blown to pieces, its oil industry, the heart of the economy, in a state of collapse and all of Libya engulfed in a spreading civil war.

As the WSWS warned at the time, the war was an imperialist rape of a defenseless ex-colonial country. Tens of thousands of Libyans died as the United States, Britain, France and their Middle

East allies bombed Libya, while arming a patchwork of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias, tribal forces, and units led by Gaddafi-regime turncoats as their foot soldiers.

“We came, we saw, he died,” then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bragged, laughing on CBS News after Gaddafi was captured, tortured, and murdered by US proxy forces in the bombed-out ruins of his home town, Sirte.

As in Afghanistan and Iraq before Libya, the horrific death and destruction of the initial imperialist intervention only set the stage for more mayhem. The attempt to install a pro-Western puppet regime atop a devastated country, controlled by clashing Islamist and tribal militias, failed miserably. An Islamist militia in Benghazi killed US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2012, and a coup forced US-backed Prime Minister Ali Zeidan to flee the country in March, before the latest humiliating flight from the US embassy in Tripoli.

The outcome is an indictment of the entire bloody intervention of US and European imperialism in the Middle East. Their foreign policy is made by a cabal of political gangsters and low-lives operating in the interests of finance capital and the oil industry. Western governments and oil companies are apparently calculating that they can watch the bloodshed unfold in Libya and, ultimately, do their deals with whatever regional militias come out on top.

As part of its sordid operations, the US and its allies have time and again allied with Al Qaeda-linked forces—like the militias led by Abdelhakim Belhadj, whom the CIA abducted and subjected to “extraordinary rendition,” sending him back to be imprisoned in Libya on terror charges, before mobilizing him against Gaddafi and then sending him on to fight the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Yesterday, reports emerged that the Iraqi regime set up under the 2003-2011 US occupation is nearing collapse, amid the offensive by Al Qaeda-linked, Syrian Sunni militias, with military leaders in Baghdad keeping “their bags packed” in case they have to flee. Like Libya, Iraq is devastated and divided into three sides in an escalating civil war: the Sunni west, a Shiite Arab rump state close to Iran, and a besieged Kurdish state in the north. This is the outcome of the policy of plunder and divide-and-rule employed by the US-led occupation.

This policy expresses the character of the imperialist ruling elites: creating nothing, they plunder, steal, and grab, particularly in weak, oil-rich countries. The regime of Gaddafi—a bourgeois nationalist whose nationalization of the oil industry in 1970 led to a significant rise in living standards—was as an obstacle to the imperialists. From their standpoint, a civil war costing the lives of hundreds of thousands, in Libya as in Iraq, was simply the start-up cost involved in profitably plundering the region’s oil.

It is worth recalling how this bloody operation was packaged and sold to the public, under the fraudulent banner of human rights. Stunned and terrified by the working class uprisings that had

toppled pro-Western dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt earlier in 2011, the imperialist powers sought to engineer the war for regime change as a means of implanting a US-controlled puppet regime in Libya, the country between them.

To help sell the war, the ruling class employed a series of middle class pseudo-left parties and accomplices in academia, who rushed to give a “left” face to the plunder of Libya—hailing it as a humanitarian war to protect the opposition forces, who they claimed were risking repression by waging a democratic revolution against Gaddafi.

As the NATO war began, France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) published a statement, “Support the Libyan Revolution! Gaddafi out,” praising the “fight to the death between the people and the dictatorship” in Libya.

In the United States, Professor Juan Cole of the University of Michigan denounced those who, like the WSWS, took a principled stand against imperialist intervention in Libya. “To make ‘anti-imperialism’ trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions,” Cole wrote, adding: “If NATO needs me, I’m there.”

At the time, the WSWS exposed these forces’ cover-up of the right-wing character of the Libyan insurgency and their bankrupt apologetics for imperialism. The WSWS’ principled opposition to imperialism has been fully vindicated by the bloody catastrophe in Libya, for which forces like the NPA and Professor Cole bear political responsibility.

In 2012, as Washington set up Zeidan’s short-lived Libyan puppet regime, Cole mocked those who had opposed the war and warned of its consequences, slandering them as Gaddafi supporters. Back from a trip to Libya in which he narrowly missed a protest by Libyan militias at the Tripoli airport, he laughed the incident off and portrayed the rape of Libya in glowing colors.

Cole wrote: “There’s a kind of black legend about Libya, that it has become a failed state and is a mess, that there are armed militiamen everywhere, that everybody is a secessionist, that the transitional government is not doing anything, that people of sub-Saharan African heritage are bothered in the streets, etc etc. The black legend is promoted in part by remnants of the Qaddafi regime and his admirers in the West, in part by overly anxious middle class Libyans ... Libya is not like Somalia! It isn’t even like Yemen.”

This falsification of the terrible reality of post-war Libya is the upshot of the cowardice and stupidity of pseudo-left politics, which expresses the interests of privileged, pro-imperialist sections of the upper-middle class. Never learning anything from the various catastrophes they have created, these forces are now promoting bloody imperialist interventions in Syria and Ukraine as democratic and humanitarian enterprises.