

Barack Obama, the Destruction of Libya, and 21st-Century Slave Markets

ACTS OF EMPIRE

During his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Barack Obama proclaimed that “only a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting.” In 2017, six years after the US-led NATO intervention in Libya, a CNN video exposed exactly what the US empire means when they talk about a just peace, as Obama had. In Tripoli, the Libyan capital, the CNN video revealed a 21st-century open-air slave market, where human beings were being bought and sold for as little as 400 dollars.

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was the political leader of Libya from the overthrow of the post-colonial monarchy in 1969 until the NATO intervention in 2011. Evaluations differ as to Gaddafi’s role in opposing foreign imperialism. For the purposes of understanding the consequences of US imperialism in Libya, a few important historical facts are important to mention: the US and Europe opposed Gaddafi since he established Libya as an independent post-colonial state. Gaddafi earned the ire of the US and Europe by nationalizing the oil industry, confiscating the property of former Italian colonists, and stridently supporting Palestine. Libya suffered under US sanctions and diplomatic isolation from 1981 until 2003.

However, while Gaddafi was consistent in rhetorically opposing US and European imperialism, at the time of his government’s overthrow, he was, in the words of Horace Campbell, “playing footsie with the west”. Following the Iraq war, the Libyan government agreed to give up its chemical weapons and shut down its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and had been meeting with the EU and British government, even making overtures to the IMF and World Bank to encourage Western investment in Libya.

While Gaddafi was willing to work with US- and European-dominated institutions, he was a lifelong advocate of political unity between Arab and African nations. At the time of his overthrow, Gaddafi was promoting a renewed sense of African unity, working to strengthen the African Union, and proposing a new common African currency, backed by billions of dollars in reserves held by the Libyan government. Libya was also leading other North African nations in opposing AFRICOM, the US military command in Africa formed in 2008.

Established in the waning days of the Bush administration, AFRICOM was a major piece of the Obama imperial foreign policy, which sought to move troops out of the Middle East towards areas of increasing inter-imperialist competition with Russia and China, particularly in Southeast Asia and North Africa. The refusal of most North African governments to host US troops forced the AFRICOM headquarters to be opened in Germany. While opposing the deployment of US troops on African soil, the Gaddafi-helmed government had welcomed Chinese investment and personnel in Libya, precisely at the moment when US competition with China over influence in North Africa was heating up. By 2011, one-tenth of Libya’s oil was going to China, and 75 Chinese companies were doing 18 billion dollars worth of business in Libya, mostly in oil and infrastructure, involving 36,000 Chinese laborers. Even though the Libyan government was willing to engage in economic and diplomatic negotiation with the US and EU, ultimately the Gaddafi government was standing in the way of the expansion of US imperialism in North Africa and doing business with its competitor.

In February 2011, the Arab Spring protest movement that began the previous year in Tunisia exploded in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, with a variety of political and social forces moving quickly from protest to armed conflict. This conflict gave Europe (particularly the UK and France) and the US the opportunity to overthrow the Gaddafi government by allying with the rebels and unleashing a seven-month NATO bombing campaign. The motley assortment of rebels included ex-government and military officials, forces loyal to the long deposed monarchy, and members of al-Qaeda. The NATO intervention allied with and unleashed terrifying violence against Libya’s minority Black population: in the town of al-Bayda, 50 sub-Saharan African migrants were burned alive. Approximately 40,000 residents of Tawergha, a historically Black town founded by former slaves, were forced to flee their homes.

By October of 2011, aided by ever-present NATO bombs and a supply of the best weapons the US could make, the rebels, organized as the National Transitional Council (NTC), had captured Tripoli. Before any Libyan could cast a single vote, the new government signed a military agreement with AFRICOM.

The overall toll of the conflict that led to the overthrow of Gaddafi was devastating. In addition to the lynching, torture, and forced expulsion of Black Libyans, the NATO campaign killed tens of thousands. The British government bragged that the bombing campaign had killed 35,000, and other investigators put the toll at 50,000. Bookending the operation was the extrajudicial murder of Gaddafi: after his capture by NTC forces, he was sodomized with a bayonet before being executed without so much as a trial. When then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was told about this war crime, she noxiously commented: *"We came, we saw, he died."*

Since that time, Libya has not had a stable government, with various militias and foreign-backed groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS elements, fighting for influence and control of oil revenue. Journalist Patrick Cockburn has called this the 'Somaliansation of Libya.' Writing in 2014, Cockburn described the situation:

Without the rest of the world paying much attention, a civil war has been raging in western Libya since 13 July between the Libya Dawn coalition of militias, originally based in Misrata, and another militia group centered on Zintan. A largely separate civil war between the forces of retired General Khalifa Haftar and the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries is being fought out in Benghazi. Government has collapsed.

General Haftar is a telling example of the kinds of people the US/NATO intervention wound up putting in power. Haftar has connections with the C.I.A. going back decades and was among the anti-Gaddafi rebels backed by NATO. Now a warlord, Haftar has imposed Saudi-style repressive laws governing the movement of women in the wide swaths of eastern Libya that he controls. There, women under 60-years-old are banned from driving, and all women are banned from leaving the country without the presence of a male guardian.

Perhaps nothing exemplifies the horror of contemporary Libya more than the situation of migrants and refugees. Tens of thousands of African migrants (including many internally displaced Libyans), fleeing conflicts, climate change, and political and religious persecution, travel through Libya trying to seek refuge in Europe. According to a 2020 Amnesty International report, in their trek through Libya these migrants face "prolonged arbitrary detention and other unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and other ill-treatment, unlawful killings, rape and other sexual violence, forced labour and exploitation at the hands of state and non-state actors in a climate of near-total impunity."

The noble-sounding words of Barack Obama ring hollow in the face of the cruel reality of 21st-century slave markets. Migrants fleeing droughts and US-caused civil wars can now be sexually assaulted, tortured, or kidnapped and sold as slaves to the highest bidder on the streets of Tripoli. Anytime the rulers of the US promise peace, we should remind ourselves of what they did in Libya, overthrowing Gaddafi and arming and supporting vicious reactionaries willing to sign oil deals with US companies and allow the presence of AFRICOM. The catastrophe brought to Libya by US imperialism is a monumental crime, and a profound reason to resist and dismantle this empire.

Sources: Horace Campbell, *Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya: Lessons for Africa in the Forging of African Unity* (2013); Patrick Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East* (2016); Amnesty International, *Libya: 'Between Life and Death': Refugees and Migrants Trapped in Libya's Cycle of Abuse*; Black Alliance for Peace; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; CounterPunch; Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting; The Grayzone; The Guardian; Jacobin; Middle East Research and Information Project; Modern Ghana; NBC News; The Real News.