

# SLOUCHING TOWARDS SIRTE

## NATO's War on Libya and Africa



Maximilian Forte

Extrait de la publication



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Maximilian C. Forte

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NATO's War on Libya and Africa



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# Contents

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Preface	9
Acknowledgments	14
Abbreviations	15
INTRODUCTION	
Liberal Imperialism and the New Scramble for Africa	17
CHAPTER ONE	
Sirte: Keystone of Independence	31
CHAPTER TWO	
Sirte: Touchstone of Imperialism	69
CHAPTER THREE	
Libyan Pan-Africanism and Its Discontents	137
CHAPTER FOUR	
A War against Africa: AFRICOM, NATO, and Racism	187
CHAPTER FIVE	
Humanitarianism and the Invention of Emergency	237
CONCLUSION	
The Aftermath: A New War on Africa	267
References	309
Index	339



# Preface

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Why did NATO intervene militarily in Libya? When did the intervention really begin, and what forms did it take? Was NATO's military campaign really about saving lives, as the key political leaders of NATO member states claimed? Or was this just another war over oil? What have been the consequences of foreign intervention? What do we learn about our governments, our media, and our ideologies, particularly as represented in Western humanitarianism? These are the primary questions addressed in this book, which began as a research and writing project from the start of the first street protests in Libya in February until the aftermath of the first national elections in July 2012.

My argument, which focuses on foreign intervention, is that NATO's campaign represents the continued militarization of Western and especially U.S. foreign policy and the rise of the new "military humanism." NATO's war in Libya was advertised as a humanitarian intervention—bombing in the name of "saving lives." Attempts at diplomacy were stifled. Peace talks were undermined and rendered impossible. Libya was barred from representing itself at the UN, where shadowy NGOs and "human rights" groups held full sway in propagating exaggerations, outright falsehoods, and racial fear mongering that served to sanction atrocities and ethnic cleansing in the name of democracy. Nothing could impede a rush to war that was far speedier than George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. A consistent refusal to examine contexts, causes, and the dire consequences of intervention speaks to the proliferation of myths that were used to justify and explain the war, heralded as a success at NATO headquarters, and proclaimed as a "high watermark" by proponents of the interventionist doctrine known as the "Responsibility to Protect."

This book takes us through the documentary history of events, processes and decisions that led up to NATO's war, the conduct of the war,

and its immediate consequences. It shows us that Western relations with a “rehabilitated” Libya after 2003 were at best shaky, mired in distrust, and exhibited a U.S. preference for regime change. Yet the foreign powers’ preferred alternative, the National Transitional Council, had more legitimacy in Europe and North America than in Libya, a fact that opened the door to new and ongoing violence in that country. NATO’s war was not about human rights, despite official propaganda. Moreover, neither “saving lives,” nor the alleged nature of the “human rights record” of the “Gaddafi regime” could ever justify what NATO wrought. Many more lives have been lost, and continue to be lost, than if there had been no foreign intervention at all. NATO not only failed to respect the UN mandate to protect civilians, it threatened many more, and entirely neglected civilian lives at risk. NATO claimed to have saved Benghazi from a massacre, and yet Sirte was devastated with the aid of NATO bombing. If this war was not about human rights, it was also not exclusively about oil, though oil remains a factor of critical importance.

NATO’s war should instead be seen as part of a larger process of militarizing U.S. relations with Africa, where the Pentagon’s AFRICOM seeks to counter Pan-Africanist initiatives such as those spearheaded by the late Muammar Gaddafi. In a broader scope, it is part of an ongoing contest between U.S. power (in decline) against the interests of China, Russia, and other ascendant regional hegemony, to secure access to both material and political resources in an effort to stall the impending demise of the U.S. while making the world safe for transnational capital. Finally, the intervention was an attempt to control the direction of uprisings in a region of critical geopolitical and economic significance to the U.S. and Europe. Libya, once prosperous, independent and defiant, is now faced with ruin, dependency and prolonged civil strife, precisely at a time of extreme political and economic volatility and uncertainty in the world system. This is the kind of Libya that has finally met with Western approval.

In writing this book, my aim was to survey, synthesize, and interpret a substantial amount of the documentation produced by the key actors in the intervention, as produced especially by diplomats, military and political leaders, human rights activists, journalists, and others. Given that NATO’s military operations were primarily aerial ones—ordered and planned from a distance—the book does not cover key local actors “on the ground,” with ethnographic detail about their personal biographies and description of everyday life in Libya. Instead the focus is on the ideological smokescreen that was raised across the world of international and



especially Western public opinion, judged in light of what has been revealed by first-hand accounts of the war in Libya and its aftermath.

The perspective of “being there” that this book embodies might come as a surprise to some Western readers. But all of us have always “been there” if we understand the central unit of analysis—the “there” in question—as one composed of our militaries, our ideologies, our fantasies of control, our preferred self-image, and our political contests. To these, we are all first hand witnesses and participants. No amount of field research in Libya will ever, in and of itself, help to explain and understand the motor forces and psychological operations of militarism and interventionism, and the cover of humanitarianism that stem from our societies and from our economic drives. This book intends to sketch out that context, while providing a critique of the political culture of late imperialist societies in the West, the kind of morality that is being refashioned for mass consumption, and the vision of humanity that is embedded within NATO and U.S. foreign policy narratives and their calls for public outrage.

The sources relied upon are varied, consisting primarily of published documents, press releases, private and independent intelligence analyses, and reports from journalists and members of human rights groups that spent time in Libya during the war and after. As always, extreme care and source criticism are essential.

Among key sources are the U.S. Embassy cables published by WikiLeaks. These cables were primarily written by diplomats attached to the U.S. Department of State, and therefore cannot represent other, unknown reports produced by military and intelligence agencies that would have actually been involved in drafting plans for the overthrow of Gaddafi. In addition, we do not have all of the cables that were written for the time period covered—I examined the 598 cables originating in the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli alone, plus more than 600 others from other U.S. Embassies on the African continent and in the Caribbean, none of which is dated after 2010. The cables were written by Americans, for American purposes, informed by American prejudices, and using a limited range of contacts within Libyan society. For these and other reasons, it would be unwise to take these cables as representing “the truth” of Libya. Where they are useful is as a window onto issues of interest to the U.S. and insight into its network of contacts in Libya.

NATO documents are even more limited, especially when in the form of the daily press releases about “Operation Unified Protector.” These tend

to be mere lists of numbers of sorties flown and targets struck, which ask the public to take them at face value when in many cases they mask strikes on civilian targets and against particular individuals, such as Muammar Gaddafi.

Reports by human rights organizations also merit source criticism. The leading ones supported foreign intervention, and until the very late stages of the war they persistently magnified their criticism of “Gaddafi forces” while somewhat minimizing any direct criticism of insurgent actions and downplaying criticisms of NATO operations even more. Only after the end of NATO operations did they begin to criticize and condemn the human rights abuses of the new regime more firmly, while making a rather half-hearted effort to document civilian deaths caused by NATO bombings.

Other government documents of value were those produced in reports by members of the U.S. Congress, by the Congressional Research Service, the White House Office of the Press Secretary, the Department of Defense press services, AFRICOM’s Public Affairs unit, and others. Most of the statements, interviews, and documents emanating from these sources are designed as officially sanctioned state propaganda, and must be read in that light, and in dialogue with actual events as they unfolded. Sometimes, of course, they can be extremely telling of actual interests and motivations, as well as useful presentations of the prejudices that guide U.S. policies.

Journalistic accounts can be useful if double-edged: useful when multiple reporters in a given location corroborate each other and show some independence by departing from NATO’s preferred narrative. This happened on occasion. Yet they are misleading when the reports are filed from a distance, relying excessively on one side of the conflict for “information,” or forming a chorus that simply reproduces official NATO statements without question and without fact-checking. In other cases, journalists’ editorial narratives produced important insights into the interventionist mindset and the extent to which culturally instituted forms of demonizing Gaddafi have become entrenched, having accumulated over nearly four decades of mass socialization from the media replaying the vitriol of political leaders in the West, often without question. It is also important to be aware of the fact that some media organizations barely hid the foreign policy agendas that they served, most notably Al Jazeera, which relayed National Transitional Council propaganda without question, just as its paymaster, the Emir of Qatar, had also deployed jets and

troops in the fight against Libya, but also CNN, with its narrative on Libya almost exactly matching that of the U.S. State Department, if not exceeding it in its interventionist zeal and breathless demonization of Gaddafi.

On the other hand, the first-hand reports of some of the foreign supporters of the Libyan government sometimes proved to be problematic for simply repeating the claims of government spokespersons without first scrutinizing the evidence for their claims—for example, that the opposition in Misrata had been totally vanquished by the government on the very eve of the collapse of Tripoli. Yet they too furnished vital documentary evidence of mass destruction and civilian casualties caused by NATO bombings that few in the mass media ever showed; their critical commentaries usually brought into bold relief the contradictions, myths, and underlying intent of NATO actions and public narratives. Whenever possible, I have also relied on reports from Libyan state television and from high officials in the former Libyan government, first to avoid reliance on what others claimed they said, and second to provide some balance to the dominance of Western officialdom in the mainstream media.

The reports of private intelligence firms, such as STRATFOR, were sometimes useful as they were often written for paid subscribers in the media, diplomatic corps, and military and intelligence circles, and were produced by individuals who in many cases had military and intelligence backgrounds. Finally, previously published works on Libyan history published before the NATO intervention were particularly valuable in providing an historical mooring that better contextualized what some might mistakenly see as merely a single “event” in 2011, that event being the war.

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# Abbreviations

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<b>ADA</b>	Libyan Foundation for African Development Aid	<b>NDI</b>	National Democratic Institute (U.S.)
<b>AFRICOM</b>	U.S. Africa Command	<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organization
<b>AI</b>	Amnesty International	<b>NTC</b>	National Transitional Council (also Interim Transnational National Council, also Transitional National Council)
<b>AOPIG</b>	African Oil Policy Initiative Group	<b>OAU</b>	Organization of African Unity
<b>AQIM</b>	Al Qaeda in the Maghreb	<b>OPIC</b>	U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation
<b>AU</b>	African Union	<b>POTUS</b>	President of the United States
<b>BISC</b>	Sahel-Saharan Bank for Investment and Commerce	<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>CDA</b>	Chargé d'Affaires	<b>TSCTP</b>	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership
<b>CEN-SAD</b>	Community of Sahel-Saharan States	<b>UNECA</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
<b>CIA</b>	U.S. Central Intelligence Agency	<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States	<b>UNHRC</b>	United Nations Human Rights Council
<b>EU</b>	European Union	<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>Eximbank</b>	U.S. Export-Import Bank	<b>UNSCR</b>	United Nations Security Council Resolution
<b>FATL</b>	Forum for African Traditional Leaders	<b>USAID</b>	U.S. Agency for International Development
<b>GDF</b>	Gaddafi Development Foundation	<b>USEAA</b>	U.S. Embassy, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
<b>GMR</b>	Great Man-made River Project	<b>USEM</b>	U.S. Embassy, Monrovia, Liberia
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch	<b>USET</b>	U.S. Embassy, Tripoli, Libya
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court	<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee for the Red Cross	<b>WICS</b>	World Islamic Call Society
<b>LAICO</b>	Libyan Arab African Investment Company		
<b>LAFICO</b>	Libyan Arab Foreign Investment Company		
<b>LAP</b>	Libyan African Investment Portfolio		
<b>LIA</b>	Libyan Investment Authority		
<b>LIFG</b>	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group		
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization		





## INTRODUCTION

# Liberal Imperialism and the New Scramble for Africa

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“There is a growing belief, not least within the ranks of latter-day new Labour missionaries, that appears to favour the reconquest of Africa. No one really suggests how this would come about, nor is there a ‘plan’ available for discussion. Yet the implicit suggestion of recent reporting from Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, sometimes echoed in London, is that imperial intervention might indeed be welcomed by peoples threatened with mayhem, anarchy and civil war. In the process, several decades of revisionist imperial history and leftist criticism of ‘neocolonialism’ have been easily ignored or forgotten, and external interference is once again being made respectable.” (Gott, 2001/1/15)

A single “plan” as such there may not be, even if the commentary on British interventions by Richard Gott above already flagged some of the key elements of the new imperial mission in Africa. These are military interventions in the name of humanitarian protection, the restoration of order to nations inevitably seen as helpless and in need of external assistance, and the reformulation of dominant ideologies. Yet that is still just part of an explanation, for it retains the suggestion that intervention may occur simply and only because “we” believe that our actions are conducted in order to benefit “them.” Gott is right to pinpoint the ideological sources of the new imperialism. In the war against Libya some of the most prominent anti-war criticisms did not come from “liberals” or vaguely self-nominated “leftists,” but rather from avowed “conservatives” and those in the Realist school of U.S. foreign policy: Ron Paul (2011/8/29), Patrick Buchanan (2011/3/8), George Will (2011/3/8), and Leslie Gelb (2011/3/8)

among others. Few recognized that liberal imperialism was the driving force in new American conquests even under putative conservatives such as George W. Bush, and thus many did not recognize “neoconservatism” whose ideological principles and goals are that of a “new” liberal imperialism: direct intervention, regime-change, nation-building, counterinsurgency, pacification, aid, development. The hard-line conservatives in the U.S. instead proclaim that America is a republic, and not an empire. Others clearly disagree. The result is the creation of a renewed hierarchy that not accidentally mirrors old ethnocentric theories of “cultural evolution” from the nineteenth century and some of the racial typologies of the time: the West, white, developed, and superior has the right to intervene in Africa, and Africa has the “right” to be intervened in, and should be barred from even intervening in its own affairs. We are not dealing with coincidences and accidents, not at this level of expenditure and obsessive strategizing: the U.S. military’s new Africa Command (AFRICOM), the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), the work of the USAID, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) with its nearly exclusive focus on Africa—none of these things are “accidents.”

“What Africa really needs,” Gott continued, highlighting conclusions of published works on Africa funded by George Soros and the U.S. Institute for Peace, “is the advice of a new generation of foreign missionaries, imbued with the new, secular religion of good governance and human rights.” As Gott also rightly spotlights:

“Other contemporary witnesses, the innumerable representatives of the non-governmental and humanitarian organisations that clog the airwaves and pollute the outside world’s coverage of African affairs with their endless one-sided accounts of tragedy and disaster, echo the same message. With the reporting and analysis of today’s Africa in the hands of such people, it is not surprising that public opinion is often confused and disarmed when governments embark on neocolonial interventions. The new missionaries are much like the old ones, an advance guard preparing the way for military and economic conquest.” (Gott, 2001/1/15)

It also helps when, within “public opinion,” the anxious motivators, the militarized altruists, and the imperial humanists are working as amplifiers and repeaters of interventionist doctrine, seeking to rally public support for the causes of the U.S. State Department. Sometimes, they even provide the appropriate emotional cues hoping to spread outrage: “my hand is trembling as I write this,” or “no time to play with my five-year old daughter, she can’t understand why, and I dare not tell her of these

horrors” (conveyed by the endless supply of Internet videos posted by unidentified “activists”). One scathing and very memorable British op-ed characterized this element of public opinion as consisting of “iPad imperialists”:

“From the comfort of his Home Counties home, possibly to the sound of birds tweeting on the windowsill, the liberal interventionist will write furious, spittle-stained articles about the need to invade faraway countries in order to topple their dictators. As casually and thoughtlessly as the rest of us write shopping lists, he will pen a 10-point plan for the bombing of Yugoslavia or Afghanistan or Iraq and not give a second thought to the potentially disastrous consequences. Now, having learned nothing from the horrors that they cheer-led like excitable teenage girls over the past 15 years, these bohemian bombers, these latte-sipping lieutenants, these iPad imperialists are back. This time they’re demanding the invasion of Libya.” (O’Neill, 2011/2/25)

Rather than stopping and taking comfort from mocking caricatures, this book takes the tenets and claims of the assemblage of “humanitarian” arguments for military intervention in Libya seriously. But taking them seriously does not mean the same thing as taking them at face value, or being unduly deferential. Instead, if we take them on their very own terms the arguments for “humanitarian” intervention and “protection” soon fall apart in the face of actual evidence from practice. The real challenge is not to get the humanitarian interventionists to stake a position, but rather to get them to maintain that position when events and processes go exactly counter to all of their stated ideals, when “saving lives” soon becomes overwhelmed by the deliberate destruction of lives, and when “protection” becomes a mere fig-leaf for regime change. It is not enough to dismiss them after showing and recognizing the nullification of dogma by practice. We still need to see why such arguments were deployed to begin with and what purposes they serve, and in turn, what purposes we are called upon to serve when orchestrators of mass opinion pointedly ask us, “how can we stand idly by?”

That question has always perplexed me. We can stand idly because we have been well trained to do so, just like the majority of U.S. and British citizens stood idly by as their troops wrought destruction, death and pain on Iraq. Citizens of NATO states whose troops went to Afghanistan did the same, as was the case in our countless other ongoing covert wars and employment of proxy torture states. We even stand idly by as protesters in our own societies get beaten, arrested, or worse, for daring to exercise their supposed rights to assembly without first submitting notice and asking the

authorities for permission, sometimes well in advance—indeed, the protesters are inevitably excoriated by mass mediated opinion. So what is so special about Libya that we could not continue to stand idly by? Had all of us developed a strong, intimate affection for these people? What did we know about these protesting Libyans that we could so readily commit ourselves to some undefined cause that mouthed suspiciously predictable buzzwords of democracy and freedom but only when spoken in some grand hall in a European capital, under the glare of camera lights? On what basis would we always be willing to credit these “rebels” with noble intentions and always give them the benefit of the doubt, while launching flaming invective at those defending the existing social order? And how could we engage with such intense evangelical sternness that we could permit ourselves to denounce and condemn those among us who would hold back and question the campaign to demolish another state? Perhaps some of us saw how we could benefit from being on “the right side of history,” which was code for being pro-military intervention by *our side*. Suddenly, we could feel very comfortable about being on the same team with the CIA, the Pentagon, and a battery of so-called “neoon” commentators who all supported the war; we would all be on “the winning team,” Team West.

This book is thus largely about our intervention, and about making ourselves accountable for it. It is true that some Libyans, often expatriates, complained loudly and severely against “anti-imperialists” and “Gaddafi apologists.” However, since they invited Western intervention, appealed to us to spend money on bombs, missiles, jets and ships to change their history for them, then whether they like it or not they invited *all* of us into their conflict and the least they could have done was to courteously desist from demanding silence of those whose support they requested. This too offered an important lesson: neocolonialism is not just about Western agency, but also of local collaborators and upholders of Western power. Anti-imperialism, most clearly and persistently articulated by some African and Latin American leaders during the war against Libya, was therefore never just a confrontation with Western opponents alone.

Among the ranks of those who remain critical of U.S. adventures are those who would entirely dismiss as nonsensical propaganda all U.S. government talk of supporting democracy, freedom, and human rights abroad (often for excellent reasons). Nonetheless, it is still necessary to take these claims seriously by understanding what they are *meant to mean* in actual practice.

“Democracy,” defined by way of comparison to the U.S. political system, can represent a significant strategic gain of importance for the U.S.

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through  
our branches  
Libya

مركز النجاة  
PEACE & DEVELOPMENT

NATO's war in Libya was proclaimed as a humanitarian intervention—bombing in the name of “saving lives.” Attempts at diplomacy were stifled. Peace talks were subverted. Libya was barred from representing itself at the UN, where shadowy NGOs and “human rights” groups held full sway in propagating exaggerations, outright falsehoods, and racial fear mongering that served to sanction atrocities and ethnic cleansing in the name of democracy. The rush to war was far speedier than Bush's invasion of Iraq.

Max Forte has scrutinized the documentary history from before, during, and after the war. He argues that the war on Libya was not about human rights, nor entirely about oil, but about a larger process of militarizing U.S. relations with Africa. The development of the Pentagon's Africa Command, or AFRICOM, was in fierce competition with Pan-Africanist initiatives such as those spearheaded by Muammar Gaddafi.

Far from the success NATO boasts about or the “high watermark” proclaimed by proponents of the “Responsibility to Protect,” this war has left the once prosperous, independent and defiant Libya in ruin, dependency and prolonged civil strife.

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