

What Does the Libyan Opposition Want?

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As everyone knows, Muammar Gaddafi is an authoritarian dictator. Authoritarian dictators are a dime a dozen in world history, though, so that is not what would distinguish him from the rest of his kind in history books. What might make him stand out is this: in the twilight of his autocratic career, Gaddafi had become such an arrant fool that he didn't even know enough to vet his own envoys for their commitment to the sovereignty of Libya. As the fate of Libya was being discussed by the powers represented in the NATO and the UN Security Council yesterday, among those most fervently calling for no-fly zones were Libya's own UN ambassadors turned defectors, Abdurrahman Mohammed Shalgham [1] and Ibrahim Dabbashi [2], making the same demand as the National Conference of Libyan Opposition (NCLO), an umbrella group of major Libyan exile organizations including the Libyan Constitutional Union (led by the so-called "Crown Prince" of Libya1) and the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL, a tool of the CIA and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War).

Thus it fell to a few good Latin American socialists to do what they could to argue the case of Libya and defend its right to self-determination — that is, the right of the Libyan people, those who are for, against, or indifferent to the soon-to-be former Libyan regime, to sort out their own affairs, free from NATO or any other foreign troops — in the court of world public opinion. And they tried, knowing that their efforts would be met with not only attacks from the Right [3] but also total incomprehension on the part of not a few leftists [4]. The Latin American socialists, however, had some powerful tactical allies in and out of the UNSC: China, Russia, Brazil, India, Portugal, South Africa, Turkey, which all weighed in on the side of caution, counseling against acting in haste without enough information to make informed decisions. Though the resulting UNSC resolution [5], unanimously voted for, referred the case of Libya to the International Criminal Court and imposed asset freeze, travel ban, arms embargo, and other sanctions, under Chapter 7 to boot, the Libyan exiles and defectors, US liberal [6] and neo-con adventurists [7], and other usual suspects didn't get everything they wanted: still no no-fly zones . . . yet. So, the thankless job done by the 20th- and 21st-century socialists may not have been a complete waste of time, though the voices of bean counters reminding the deciders of the costs of the Iraq war probably counted far more in this age of austerity.

The zealous calls of the Libyan opposition for no-fly zones, in any case, suggest that the fall of the Gaddafi regime may not come as quickly as I thought it would. After all, why call for any such thing if you are confident about being able to march into Tripoli and hang your enemy on your own in a matter of days? So, the world may have a little more time to go look for missing information and think.

There are many unanswered questions in the fog of what is now a low-intensity civil war in Libya. The least examined question in the corporate media, however, is the character of the Libyan opposition: what it is and what it wants. Before the rest of the world learns anything about it,

though, the opposition has already formed an “interim government” in Benghazi, headed by Mustafa Mohamed Abud Ajleil, the former Libyan justice minister who resigned from the government in protest just a few days ago.

Who else are involved in the formation of this interim government? First of all, other high-ranking defectors, both “civilian and military,” from the Gaddafi regime. The aforementioned Libyan ambassadors and other diplomats who have come out against the regime will represent it abroad. Opposition tribal leaders are naturally part of it, too. Is the NCLO, too? That remains to be seen, but the odds are strong that its members will get their piece of the post-Gaddafi Libyan pie one way or another.

What might be the politico-economic philosophy of the interim government? The Gaddafi regime’s neoliberal turn is well known [8], and the defectors will probably bring that bent with them. As for the opposition in exile, the following excerpt from a report on a 1994 conference of Libyan exiles including the NFSL, hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, may give us a clue of their orientation [9]: “Most participants argued for privatization and a strong private sector economy. . . . [Economist Misbah] Oreibi warned that many of the big public sector enterprises will simply have to be shut down and the losses absorbed because they will never be profitable.” It is hard not to conclude that the marriage of old exiles and recent defectors is likely to result in a doubly neoliberal offspring.

Is that what the Libyans who took to the streets — probably thinking that they were joining the Great 21st-century Arab Revolt for not only political freedom but also social justice — really want? If not, what independent organization do they have to press their own demands? If there is a Libyan counterpart of the Tunisian Communist Workers’ Party, the Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt, or the Wa’ad Party of Bahrain, for instance, I have yet to hear from it.

Meanwhile, Libya’s ambassador to the US, Ali Aujali, has already made a public statement in favor of the interim government, so it is a matter of time before Washington is asked to recognize it, and requests for recognition will soon begin to arrive elsewhere as well . . . though there is no way of knowing if this interim government is popular or unpopular among the Libyans, even among those who have been involved in the Feb17 uprising.

Yoshie Furuhashi

1 By the way, the “Crown Prince” of Libya is now represented by the same PR agency as the King of Bahrain: Bell Pottinger, a Tory firm in Britain, founded by a friend of Lady Thatcher’s. Among its previous clients was the Libyan Economic Development Board led by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Just as this charmed company has profited from both sides of the current Libyan political divide, so will the empire, most probably, however this conflict shakes out, since it has wisely invested in both camps.

* From MRZine, 27.02.11 :
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/furuhashi270211.html>

* Yoshie Furuhashi is Editor of MRZine.

Al Jazeera Promotes Libya's "Crown Prince" Who Calls for Military Intervention in Libya

Al Jazeera received a lot of kudos for its exciting coverage of the intifadas in Tunisia and Egypt. Many of us in the West in particular found it to be a useful source of information, since the Western media's coverage of them, largely shaped by imperialist preferences as always, was quantitatively lesser and qualitatively worse than Al Jazeera's.

Al Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Revolt began to deteriorate, however, when revolutionary sparks started to fly in the direction of the Gulf states, which would eventually ignite an unprecedented (and very politically promising¹) uprising in Bahrain, made up of 100,000-strong demonstrations in a nation whose population is only about 800,000. Having paid close attention to Al Jazeera's role in the Arab Revolt, As'ad AbuKhalil criticized its about-face in his blog *Angry Arab News Service*:

"GCC met and issues a statement in support of Bahrain. The people of Bahrain are on their own now: there is no Aljazeera to support their cause and expose the regime, and the US and EU will do their best to rationalize and support government repression. Shame on Aljazeera Arabic for abandoning the people of Bahrain, and for even invoking a sectarian element in their coverage, implying that only Shi'ites are protesting." (17 February 2011 [[10](#)])

At about the same time, an uprising erupted in Libya. The Gaddafi regime's violent repression of it, plus the continuing spectacle of seemingly endless defections of high-ranking officials and military men from the regime, has proved a godsend to everyone whose biggest concern is what may become of the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet — and more importantly its neighbor Saudi Arabia, whose own Shia population not only share the same grievances as their Bahraini counterparts but are also concentrated in one of its oil-producing regions. Forget Bahrain, let's focus on Libya!

Or so went the directive, one suspects, from Al Jazeera's owner Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani.

Now, there's nothing wrong with talking about Libya if the purpose is to convey accurate information about it. But there is everything wrong with making propaganda about it in such a way as to put its people at risk. And I'm afraid that's exactly what Al Jazeera has begun to do. Both in Arabic and English, it has been featuring leading members of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, an outfit funded by the CIA and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War, as credible sources of news and views, much as the Western media have been doing.²

That is bad enough. Yesterday, Al Jazeera hit a new low: it gave the self-styled "Crown Prince" of Libya — Muhammad as-Senussi — a platform from which to call on "the international community to help remove Gaddafi from power and stop the ongoing 'massacre'." [[11](#)] By the "international community," of course he doesn't mean those of us who might organize protests at Libyan embassies or that kind of thing. He means the great and not-so-great powers that may be persuaded to deploy their armed forces in Libya.

"Crown Prince": *What I try to do to stop the massacre — I try to put pressure and call the international community to stop this killing. Gaddafi — he must leave. And that's what I try to do every day.*

Barnaby Phillips, *Al Jazeera: So, what should the international community do and what can the international community do?*

"Crown Prince": *The international community — they know the way to stop the massacre.*

Barnaby Phillips: *But are you in favor of military intervention from the international community?*

"Crown Prince": *I think, anything [that] stops killing, I will support it."*

And the Al Jazeera interviewer lets the “Crown Prince” leave it at that, without challenging him on this point at all. (Needless to say, he doesn’t ask a question that upsets the narrative frame for foreign military intervention: since sections of armed forces have already joined the revolt, isn’t what’s going on in Libya now less the regime mowing down unarmed protesters than a civil war between two armed camps, each controlling large territories with valuable resources?)

Seriously, what is the point of rising up to take back the country from its current ruler — and in fact having already successfully taken over large parts of it [12] — if foreign powers get to enter the country at the urging of its would-be king, to take it all away from you again? Is Al Jazeera for revolution . . . or counter-revolution?

Now, no one on the Left should lose sleep over the fate of a man who has pitched too many tents in too many contradictory camps [13]. But we have every reason to be concerned about what the empire, aided by mass media, might attempt in Libya, from getting its assets to take advantage of an uprising for which, being safely in exile, they made no personal sacrifices themselves, to wresting control of Libya’s oil-producing regions, or perhaps even the whole country, from the hands of not only its soon-to-be-former regime but also its people.

by Yoshie Furuhashi

1 Women at the vanguard of a political strike! Chants for unity across sects! Muslims and secular leftists out in the streets together!

2 E.g., “Deadly ‘Day of Rage’ in Libya” (quoting “Mohammed Ali Abdellah, deputy leader of the exiled National Front for the Salvation of Libya,” Al Jazeera, 18 February 2011); “Libya’s Lucrative Ties” (interviewing “Dr. Mohamed al-Magariaf, the co-founder of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya,” Al Jazeera, 22 February 2011); “Libya on the Brink” (interviewing “Ibrahim Sahad, the secretary-general of the National Front for the salvation of Libya,” Al Jazeera, 23 February 2011); “Libya: A New Chapter?” (interviewing “Abdelhakim Belhadj, co-founder of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya,” Al Jazeera, 21 January 2011); “Libya: A New Chapter?” (interviewing “Abdelhakim Belhadj, co-founder of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya,” Al Jazeera, 14 February 2011).

* From MRZine, 25.02.11 :
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/furuhashi250211.html>

What Is the National Front for the Salvation of Libya?

In his blog *Lenin’s Tomb*, Richard Seymour asserts confidently:

“Because the trouble for the US and UK governments in this revolt is that they really, really don’t want Gadaffi to fall. Gadaffi is someone with whom they can do business. By contrast, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, long a leading element in the resistance, is less likely to be so pliable.” [14]

Not so fast. All three components of his observation — what the US and UK governments want, whether the National Front for the Salvation of Libya is really “a leading element in the resistance,” and whether the NFSL is less pliable than Gaddafi — are open to dispute.

1. Is it true that the US and UK governments “really, really don’t want Gaddafi to fall”? I doubt it. The great powers are playing in Libya, in my view, the same game as they have in Tunisia and Egypt: at first, at a loss as to what to do, they back the regimes in power exactly as they are, since they have been good to them (Berlusconi’s first response to the Libyan uprising is the most emblematic of this initial Western reaction [15]); then, seeing no way back to the status quo ante, they seek to manage the transition already underway [16] whether they like it or not (they have long cultivated assets among the oppositions, too, precisely for this kind of eventuality) [17]. So, the imperialists’ Plan A was to see if Gaddafi could quell the uprising, as he had managed to put down many previous challenges to his rule. Now that Plan A is up in smokes, though, it’s time for them to shift to Plan B: try to find collaborators and to begin a new beautiful relationship. Some of the collaborators may be found in the elements of the ancien régime (e.g., the armies in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt); others may be found in the former opposition (e.g., the likes of the Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim, one of whose first tweets after the fall of Mubarak was to tell the striking workers who are seeking to establish a new just social order to go back to work and “work like never before”).

In Tunisia and Egypt, the continuing vigor of working-class protests, including industrial actions, has so far prevented Plan B from working as well as the empire hoped. (No doubt the Western power elites are working day and night now to come up with Plan C.) In Libya, however, the empire may get lucky, especially if it succeeds in passing off its assets as “leading members of the opposition” fit to rule post-Gaddafi Libya. That leads to the next question.

2. Is the National Front for the Salvation of Libya really “a leading element in the resistance”? How do we know? Ian Black, for instance, observes [18]: “Exiled groups such as the National Front for the Salvation of Libya are thought to enjoy little support among the country’s 6.5 million people.” To be sure, much of the media are not only heavily relying on “information” from the NFSL but also presenting its leading members as credible alternative leaders as well as political experts, but that is all the more reasons to be skeptical. Recall the efforts to spin the Egyptian revolution first and foremost as a Facebook revolution engineered, behind the scenes, by Gene Sharp-reading, Otpor-emulating young professionals schooled in the Academy of Change in Qatar. That is a kind of performative speech: it’s not that those in charge of the MSM necessarily think the Egyptian revolution was really made by such characters — they must know that the coup de grâce was delivered by workers who, relying on tight bonds forged through “many years of meetings and joint struggle,” [19] went on strike en masse, especially in strategic sectors such as the Suez Canal; rather it’s that the power elites of the West want them, rather than the organic intellectuals of the working class [20], to be the leaders of the post-Mubarak order and steer it into “a retrenchment of neoliberalism.” [21] So, from the point of view of the propagandists looking to shape post-Gaddafi Libya in a way that furthers rather than damages the interests of capitalists and imperialists, what’s to like about the NFSL? That segues into the last question.

3. Is “the National Front for the Salvation of Libya . . . less likely to be so pliable” than Gaddafi? I’m afraid the NFSL will be even more pliable than the autocratic colonel that it has long sought to supplant. According to Richard Keeble [22], Jeffrey Richelson [23], and Joseph T. Stanik [24] among other sources, the NFSL was an outfit funded by the CIA and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War. While more recent funding sources of the NFSL remain unknown, the young Libyans who are desperate to join the Great 21st-century Arab Revolt, when they do succeed in overthrowing the Gaddafi family, surely deserve a better leadership than the spooky specter apparently raised from the dustbin of the last century.

Gaddafi is finished. First rejected by the axis of resistance [25], now he is about to be abandoned by the West as well. That means it is all the more important to help the Libyan people defend their

victory from would-be thieves of the spoils of blood shed for freedom.

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* From MRZine, 20.02.11:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/furuhashi240211.html>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/americas/2011/02/20112261323395683.html>

[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/25/AR2011022504349.html>

[3] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704150604576166452254733490.html>

[4] See on ESSF: [What's going on in Libya? From the Arab World to Latin America](#)

[5] <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10187.doc.htm>

[6] <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2011/02/lawmakers-step-up-criticism-of.html>

[7] <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54629>

[8] See on ESSF: [The Libyan Labyrinth](#)

[9] <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/0194/9401050.htm>

[10] <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/02/gcc-supports-bahrain-aljazeera-forgets.html>

[11] <http://english.aljazeera.net/video/africa/2011/02/201122416028655869.html>

[12] <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2055251,00.html>

[13] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAYzdQSEOWU>

[14] See on ESSF: [Libya: A regime in mortal freefall](#)

[15] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/20/us-italy-libya-berlusconi-idUSTRE71J1LH20110220>

[16] <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/nasrallah110211.html>

- [17] <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/amin070210.html>
- [18] <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/article1481125.ece>
- [19] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17labor.html?_r=1
- [20] See on ESSF: [Egypt: Independent Trade Unionists' Declaration](#)
- [21] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201122414315249621.html>
- [22] <http://books.google.com/books?id=cyPgRLszTGsC&pg=PA50&dq=%22national+front+for+the+salvation+of+libya%22>
- [23] <http://books.google.com/books?id=tYC4AAAAIAAJ>
- [24] <http://books.google.com/books?id=sT73Ju1Za5IC&pg=PA41#v=onepage&q&f=false>
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