

Libya: Gilbert Achcar and the decent left

Tuesday 6 September 2011, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 28 August 2011).

Gilbert Achcar - who considers that the title of this article is distorting his point of view - has answered Richard Seymour's arguments here: [After Gaddafi](#) (ESSF, article 22765).

A quote from Achcar's interview:

At the onset of NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya, the main justification for it was that Gaddafi's forces would massacre the resistance and civilians living in the places taken by the resistance, especially Benghazi. What has been learned since then about how likely such a scenario was?

In situations of urgency, there is no better judge than the people directly concerned, and there was unanimity on that score. Did you ever hear of any significant group in Benghazi opposed to the request of a No-Fly zone made to the UN and advocating another way to prevent Gaddafi's troops from taking the city? ... Anyone who from far away disputes the fact that Benghazi would have been crushed is just lacking **decency** in my view. Telling a besieged people from the safety of a Western city that they are cowards - because that's what disputing their claim that they were facing a massacre amounts to - is just **indecent**.

That's about the balance of forces. What about the likelihood that if Benghazi had fallen there would have been a massacre? Isn't that still a matter of speculation?

No, not at all. Let me first remind you that the repression that Gaddafi unleashed in February, from the very beginning of the Libyan uprising, was much greater than anything else we have seen since then. Take even the case of Syria: today, several months after the protest movement started in March, it is estimated that the number of people killed in Syria has reached 2,200. The range of estimates of the number of people who were killed in Libya in the first month alone, before the Western intervention, starts at more than that figure and reaches 10,000. The use by Gaddafi of all sorts of weapons, including his air force, was much more extensive and intensive than anything we have seen until now in other Arab countries.

... When Adolphe Thiers's forces took back Paris at the time of the Commune in 1871, with much less lethal weaponry they killed and executed 25,000 persons. This is the kind of massacre that Benghazi was facing, and that is why I said under such circumstances - when the city's population and the rebellion requested, even implored the UN to provide them with air cover, and in the absence of any alternative - that it was neither acceptable nor **decent** from the comfort of London or New York to say, 'No to the no-fly zone'. Those on the left who did so were in my view reacting out of knee-jerk anti-imperialism, showing little care for the people concerned on the ground. That's not my understanding of what it means to be on the left. [Emphases added]

How have we come from “a legitimate and necessary debate” to decrying opposition to NATO intervention as “indecent”? How has this lifelong anti-imperialist made this symptomatic descent into the trope of decency, the corollary of an attempt to morally browbeat opponents? It is probably indicative of a certain insecurity in Achcar’s position. Let me explain. Achcar maintains that Benghazi was facing a massacre on a scale of Thiers’ crushing of the Paris Commune - implicitly, by virtue of superior weaponry, it would be an even greater massacre in relative terms. If Achcar’s example holds, then a proportionately similar massacre in Benghazi would have involved the systematic and indiscriminate killing of at least 8,000 people in a short space of time. Leaving aside the question of decency for a second, and also leaving aside the possibility of non-military resolutions to this crisis (no one else bothered to pursue this, so why should I?), have we any reason to doubt that something like this would have happened in the event of Benghazi being conquered?

We do. Taking Achcar’s example further, a proportionately similar massacre in Misrata would result in the systematic and indiscriminate killing of about 5,000 people in a short space of time. But Human Rights Watch documents a total of 257 deaths over the first two months of war in the city of Misrata [1], including both combatants and civilians (though the majority are estimated to be combatants). Misrata suffered some of the worst, most sustained fighting. Its recapture by Qadhafi’s forces during March would have provided the opportunity for a horrendous, indiscriminate massacre with thousands of executions. Yet nothing of the kind occurred. Estimates of the total number of deaths vary, of course, and it is unlikely that HRW documented every single death. The highest estimate I’ve seen for the city is from a news report in mid-May, where the total number of deaths on all sides, from all war-related causes, was estimated at 1,000+ [2]. This is suggestive of deaths resulting from insurgency and counterinsurgency. In fact, there do not seem to be any documented massacres approaching the scale Achcar refers to, despite Qadhafi’s advances in reclaiming much lost territory during the war. So, the entire case for the no-fly zone is indeed based on speculation. There are good grounds on which one may doubt it.

Deferring the question of decency for yet another moment, there is another problem here. Achcar depicts a range of estimates of deaths resulting from killings in the first month alone as ranging between somewhat higher than 2,200 and as high as 10,000. It is quite correct that Qadhafi went further, faster in repressing the rebellion than other Arab states had thus far done. Libyan police forces had opened machine gun fire on protesters. As the rebellion spread, Qadhafi opted to force a war on the opposition, presumably calculating that he stood a better chance of survival if he shifted the battle onto a terrain where he had a clear advantage. Yet even given this, there is as yet no credible basis for the figure of 10,000 killed in the first month alone. Achcar has previously attributed this figure to the ICC [3]. In the interview, the source for the estimates given is a Wikipedia entry, which cites an IRIB report [4] attributing the figure to the ICC. In fact, the figure originates from a report initially posted on Twitter by the newspaper *Al Arabiya* [5], citing the comments of a Libyan ICC member based in Paris who claimed that after just one week of rebellion, the regime had killed 10,000 people and wounded 50,000. Bear in mind, that’s not deaths on all sides and from all causes - it’s regime killings during a single week. And it’s not well founded. At the same time as this claim was being circulated, HRW put the total deaths at about 233 [6]. By the end of February, the UN general secretary estimated about 1,000 deaths [7]. So Achcar misattributes his claim and gives it a credence it does not merit - the author of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* is not at his forensic best here, to put it no more strongly than that.

In fact, it was not until mid-June that such a figure was cited by a credible source. This was when the UN war crimes expert, Cherif Bassiouni, estimated that *after four months of fighting* including NATO bombing, there were potentially between 10-15,000 dead on all sides, both civilian and combatant [8]. Parenthetically, Bassiouni’s inquiry had presented evidence of war crimes by Qadhafi’s forces, including attacks on civilians, as well as some by the opposition. But he did not

allege indiscriminate massacres, and certainly nothing approaching a scale warned of by Achcar. So, there are yet further reasons to doubt Achcar's case that a massacre of close to ten thousand in one city alone was afoot in late March. We have not yet broached whether it would be decent to do so, but we'll come to that.

Another problem with Achcar's line of argument is that he refers to a "no-fly zone" as if this was what was under contention. It is now at the tail-end of August, and the argument over a no-fly zone has long since been passe. The UN resolution went far beyond a no-fly zone. NATO's intervention likewise went beyond a no-fly zone, involving a combination of bombardment, intelligence and special forces operations which subordinated the rebel movement to the military and political direction of external powers. This was precisely what was anticipated by the knee-jerk anti-imperialists. (Hitchens, much as one hates to cite him in this context, had a point when he used to say that a knee-jerk is a sign of a healthy reflex). But if there were reasons to doubt the idea of a coming massacre in Benghazi, and if the argument was not over a limited measure to prevent that outcome (a 'no-fly zone'), but rather over a more comprehensive intervention to subordinate the revolt to US interests, then what is left of Achcar's strictures? As he himself makes clear in the interview quoted above, the figures are important to his case. "One must compare the civilian casualties that resulted from NATO strikes with the potential civilian casualties that they prevented through limiting the firepower of Gaddafi's forces towards rebel-held populated areas." If he is right, then the intervention saved lives. If there is any reason for doubting it, then his position begins to look problematic. It won't do to pretend that such doubts amount to a claim that Benghazi rebels who supported intervention were "cowardly" - it's possible to understand the terrible position they were in, and the fears that they had of repression at Qadhafi's hands, without ceding the right to make an independent judgment. On the other hand, if a massacre really was afoot, and NATO intervention the only way to prevent it, is Achcar's critical-non-support and decent-non-opposition as wholesome as his strident posture suggests? Is anything short of active lobbying to secure the necessary intervention, even with all caveats and criticisms, "acceptable"? It begins to look like a very unstable, improvised and ultimately mealy-mouthed position. In fact, despite the strengths of his analysis, I think there are important aspects of his interpretation of events that have been flawed from inception.

For example, he began by asserting that Washington's interests indirectly and temporarily coincided with those of the opposition, in the following way [9]: Qadhafi was likely to perpetrate a massacre to rival that in Hama in 1982. This would have obliged the US to seek an oil embargo against the regime which, at a time of rising global energy costs, was not sustainable. The invasion of Iraq notably came just as world oil prices were showing a structural tendency to rise. The only condition under which the US was prepared to relax sanctions against Iraq would be in the event of Hussein's overthrow. So, "regime change" became the mantra. Similarly, when Qadhafi's continued tenure threatened to drive up oil prices further, the US had an interest in overthrowing him.

Achcar continues to support this argument, but it falls down on a number of grounds. The first, obviously, is the dubious status of this coming massacre, leaving aside how the US would have been 'forced' to respond. The second is the actual imposition of sanctions [10] affecting Libyan oil companies beginning in February. The third is the fact that the US has not shown any sign of being particularly worried by high oil prices - indeed, while Achcar interprets the war on Iraq as an attempt to free up oil and reduce prices, he must be aware that one predictable consequence of the invasion and occupation of Iraq was to drive up energy prices to record highs. There is one more objection that we'll return to.

The above has some important implications. The imposition of the oil embargo, for example, was an important aspect of NATO's war, blocking the government's attempts to raise revenues. It meant that the opposition leadership could gain recognition, trading rights and permission to sell oil and

thus survive as a viable material force calling itself a government - provided it satisfied its US and EU sponsors. So when Achcar asserted that NATO was deliberately drawing out the war and frustrating the rebels' chances of success [11], in order to give them time to bring the transitional council fully under control, he was arguably in denial about the extent to which the opposition was already fully under control. (In fact, the NATO strategy stands completely vindicated on military grounds alone. The targeted bombing, preventing the concentration of Qadhafi's forces and encouraging the fragmentation of the regime, ensured the opposition's ultimate success at minimal outlay and no real risk to NATO forces). If further evidence that Achcar is in denial on this score is needed, consider that he continued to depict the opposition leadership as "a mix of political and intellectual democratic and human rights dissidents", long after this had become a completely unrealistic and unworldly representation ignoring the multitude of former regime elements, businessmen, military figures, and people like Khalifa Hifter, who have no earthly business being called "human rights dissidents". It is they, people like General Abdallah Fatah Younes and Ibrahim Dabbashi, who were the earliest and most vociferous advocates of an alliance with NATO. It is those elements whose hand was strengthened by NATO's intervention.

The biggest problem, though, is that his analysis of US strategy is far too reductionist, taking no account of the serious strategic cleavages evident at the top of the Washington foreign policy establishment. Some of the realists expressed a fear of being dragged into yet another Middle East 'quagmire'. Others were convinced that if Qadhafi was overthrown by a popular revolt, there would be a vacuum of authority in which jihadis would thrive. But the strongest supporters of intervention were 'humanitarian interventionists', whose case was similar to that of the liberal hawk, Anne-Marie Slaughter [12] (who I believe has been an advisor of Obama on foreign policy). To wit, there's an expanding young and educated population in the Middle East, which has been deprived of political channels and economic opportunity, and which will therefore be a major problem for the US unless American power seems to champion their interests. The US, it is thus argued, must respond to this revolutionary wave by siding with reform and not just the old guard dictatorships. Leave aside the empirical basis of this analysis - it is sufficient to note that it is taken seriously by influential sectors of the US foreign policy elite. As such, the intervention can be seen less as a war for oil than an attempt to cohere a response to a revolution that threatened US control, limited enough to minimise the worries of realists and defence establishment figures like Robert Gates and Carter Ham while giving the US a chance to rebuild its 'humanitarian' credit.

This is what the indecent left opposed: not the staving off of a hypothetical massacre, but the predictable, successful hijacking of a popular revolt by imperialist powers in alliance with the relatively conservative elites dominant in the transitional council. By moralising about the decency or otherwise of anti-imperialist arguments, and pinning so much of his argument on the invocation of humanitarian emergency, Achcar obscures the politics of intervention. The question at stake was and is: should the population of Libya rule Libya? Since intervention ensured that the answer would be "no", it was correct to oppose it.

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P.S.

* From <http://leninology.blogspot.com/2011/08/gilbert-achcar-and-decent-left.html>

Footnotes

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