Bernard-Henri Lévy makes “humanitarian” case for bombing Libya

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On March 24, French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy gave a chat interview on the web site of *Le Monde* defending the unprovoked war of aggression launched by the United States, Britain and France against Libya.

In the 1970s Lévy was one of the leading “New Philosophers”, a group of young intellectuals criticizing both Marxism and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) from the right, citing human rights concerns, after the PCF sell-out of the general strike of May-June 1968. Initially sympathetic to the Socialist Party, these forces rapidly moved to the right together with the PS. They have become wealthy and prominent media personalities, with several leaving the big business PS to support conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007.

In his thoroughly dishonest interview, Lévy uses his bogus “human rights” credentials to bolster the propaganda of the French government—which claims to be intervening in Libya in a limited campaign designed to protect the lives of rebel National Council supporters.

In this, Lévy is protecting not only the criminal policies of the French government, but himself. He personally played a significant role in the lead-up to the Western attack, arranging a meeting on March 10 between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and leaders of the National Council, the rebel group fighting the Libyan government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Shortly after this, Sarkozy recognized the National Council as the Libyan government. Paris then pressed for a UN resolution to allow the bombing of Libya, which began on March 19.

Le Monde’s interview—titled “BHL: The National Council wants a secular Libya”—began with a question on why Lévy took an interest in the Libyan dossier and arranged the meeting between the National Council and Sarkozy. Lévy replied: “It’s not a dossier. It’s Benghazi.” In the face of the threat to Benghazi, Lévy insists, “I was deeply moved. I did what I could.”

Upon further questioning about his role, he said: “I played no role. I only had, one night in Benghazi, the crazy idea of getting on the telephone and calling the President of the Republic of my country and suggesting that he receive a delegation from free Libya.” He then denied he had any involvement in “political matters,” saying: “I am like you. I am watching with anxiety the development of events.”

This absurd comment raises far more questions than it answers. It is transparently obvious that Lévy is not, as he claims, an ordinary citizen concerned at the development of the Libyan crisis. One feels compelled to ask: how did Lévy get into Benghazi, in the middle of a civil war, with a direct telephone line to Sarkozy?

The posture Lévy adopts—that his support for the French attack on Libya and for the National Council is based on disinterested concern for saving human lives—is a fraud.

In fact, Lévy is hardly opposed to killing, as he makes clear. Asked whether he supported limiting operations to enforcing a no-fly zone in Libya, he replied: “We must go beyond the ‘no-fly zone.’ That is to say to go all the way to targeted strikes against Gaddafi’s heavy weaponry. It’s regrettable. It’s horrible, even the idea of a targeted strike. But if we really want to protect the civilians of Misrata, Syrte, and Benghazi, there is no other solution.”

Lévy later tried to adopt a more humanitarian posture, claiming: “For my part, I feel that I am absolutely a pacifist. It’s in the name of the idea I have of peace that I think we must stop the war provoked by Gaddafi against his own people.”

This is a dishonest evasion. Lévy’s “idea of peace” involves massive and deadly attacks on Libyan soldiers and civilians, in the air campaign the Western powers have unleashed on Libyan army units and on Tripoli. Lévy views these deaths, however, as politically preferable to the deaths that might occur in Benghazi, were Gaddafi’s forces to retake the city.

Lévy never explained the class reasons underlying his calculation. Instead, he advanced the preposterous claim that he backs the National Council because they are more democratic than Gaddafi. Thus he said: “There’s one important thing already: [the National Council forces] are secular Muslims. The Libya they envision will be a Libya in which religion will be a matter of conscience. The government that will replace the current dictatorship will be the product of free, and probably transparent elections.”

Like the other pro-imperialist propagandists of the National Council, Lévy falls completely silent on who makes up the National Council, flatly asserting that they will—“probably”—lead a democratic regime. In fact, there is no reason to believe that this is inevitable, or even probable. Indeed, it is widely reported that the National Council is an uneasy coalition of various ex-Gaddafi regime officials, Islamist groups, tribal leaders, and middle-class human rights activists, who are, through people like Lévy, in close contact with right-wing governments in the West.

Thus one questioner asked Lévy: “The issue of the ‘tribal’ component [of the National Council] or the historic rivalry between eastern and western Libya is rarely evoked. After your visit to the revolutionary forces, did you not integrate this into your analysis?” Lévy replied: “No, maybe because I did not have the time to study the question. But it is also because the representatives of the National Council themselves say and repeat that this ‘tribal component’ plays a small role in their analysis of the situation.”

Lévy wants his readers to believe that he traveled to Benghazi,

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ignorant of whom he was going to meet, and still has not had "time to study the question." This is no more credible than Lévy's other assertions. However, a few quotations from *Le Monde*—a paper Lévy knows well, as he sits on its oversight committee—will help clarify the question of the National Council.

Luis Martinez of the Center for International Research and Studies (CERI) at Sciences-Po in Paris, told *Le Monde*: "There are three groups in the opposition: the Islamists, the human rights defenders, and the most numerous: the youth." Though Martinez did not mention it, it is well known that the top leadership of the National Council is in fact provided by recent turncoats from the Gaddafi regime. These include ex-Justice Minister Mustafa Abdul Jalil and General Abdel Fattah Younis al Obaidi, commander of the Libyan Thunderbolt Special Forces unit.

The Islamist forces participating in the National Council include the Oumma Party and the Islamic Combat Group, according to Hasni Abidi, a researcher in Switzerland. These forces explicitly support a theocratic state.

François Dumasy, of the Institute for Political Studies in Aix-en-Provence, explained that there are youth following the National Council who are "worried about the liberalization of the economy and the rise of unemployment in recent years." However, there is no "common vision" between the National Council's various components, Dumasy explained: "You must understand that for 42 years of Gaddafi's rule, political expression was reduced to a minimum."

Indeed, *Le Monde* suggested that the National Council enjoys little popular support. Rémy Ourdan, *Le Monde*'s correspondent in Benghazi, noted: "One does not sense in the population a phenomenal enthusiasm for the National Council." *Le Monde* added: "The difficulty of clearly identifying its members and the fact that its president and spokesman held office in the Gaddafi regime do not help this 'parallel government.'"

Lévy's claims that the National Council will promote democratic or secular rule are lies. It is an unstable coalition of middle-class and ruling-class elements, who have responded to a radicalization in the North African masses by exploiting the lack of political leadership in the working class to establish a military alliance with Western imperialism. Dependent on the major powers for military support, they will negotiate a fire sale of Libya's oil reserves and provide the West with a right-wing base for further operations in North Africa, should they come to power.

It is symptomatic of Lévy's class standpoint that he instinctively sided with such forces, despite the reactionary content of their politics.

It must be added that the French ruling class has long experience and understanding of the role such petty-bourgeois forces play in binding the workers hand and foot to imperialist politics. In France, the human rights activists evolve in an affluent milieu of academics, union bureaucrats and parties like the New Anti-Capitalist Party that is mobilized to contain and disarm every strike movement by the workers. During last autumn's oil strike, for instance, they insisted that the workers had to submit strictly to the unions' negotiation of pension cuts with Sarkozy and respond to police strike-breaking only with "symbolic" protests.

As struggle erupts in Libya, these forces are now backing the war. It is significant that the arguments advanced by the NPA to justify its support for the war are essentially those of Lévy. (See: "A tool of imperialism: France's New Anti-Capitalist Party backs war on Libya ").

Lévy is quite aware of the imperialist interests underlying France's campaign in Libya. This is the inescapable conclusion arising from his preposterous reply to a question about whether "the military intervention in Libya is only motivated by the protection of the Libyan people and of human rights?"

Lévy dodged the question, simply saying: "That's what it seems like, yes. What else do you think it would be?"

This fantastically naïve and flatly unbelievable reply gives Lévy's game away. He knows the major powers are vying for Libya's 46.4 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and its strategic location at the crossroads of North Africa—a region now shaken by revolutionary working class struggles. Far from being innocently ignorant of how the game of state influence is played, Lévy is an experienced influence peddler, whose reply is simply designed to hide the oil grab and the broader imperialist interests he is backing by supporting the National Council.

The son of André Lévy, an influential merchant of exotic African woods who ran the Bécob firm, Bernard-Henri Lévy repeatedly exploited his political ties to help his father's ailing firm.

A first time was 1986. As *L'Express* notes, "Bernard went all-out for his father. Did he intervene with presidential counselors to use the presidency's African contacts to bump up the Ivory Coast's debts to Bécob to top priority? BHL denies this intervention. However, he admits having contacted [then-PS Economy Minister] Pierre Bérégovoy to help his father." Lévy also looked for help with the conservatives around Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, and ultimately got an advantageous state loan after the personal intervention of President François Mitterrand.

Lévy's firm also obtained an advantageous loan from François Pinault, a Gaullist politician, luxury firm executive, and today the 67th richest man in the world with a fortune of $11.5 billion.

Given Pinault's poor reputation in business circles and his ties to far-right figures like Jean-Marie Le Chevallier and neo-fascist National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, *L'Express* notes, "Helping Bernard-Henri Lévy, a star of the intellectual left and leader of an already substantial network in publishing and media circles, was perhaps not such a stupid move. … The theory of a gesture by Pinault to win over BHL matches well, in any case, with subsequent developments: the turn of the [Pinault] group towards cultural industries and the birth of a 'great friendship' with Bernard."

Ten years later, according to *L'Express*, Pinault bought out Bécob for 800 million francs, or roughly $130 million: "BHL's fortune is therefore significant. It amounts to somewhere between 150 and 180 million euros. This has played a key role in his history."

This is indeed a fitting description not only of Lévy himself, but of the entire political edifice of contemporary humanitarian phrase-mongering in France. Having begun as the ideology of various discontented students and sons of the bourgeoisie in the post-1968 period, it evolved very rapidly as these forces themselves became affluent or—in the case of Lévy—immensely rich. Today it serves rather openly as the verbal fig leaf for the strategic interests of French imperialism.

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