

Libya as a model for redividing the Middle East

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A column by Philip Zelikow entitled “Gaddafi’s fall will renew the Arab spring,” published on the *Financial Times* web site Monday, provides a glimpse into the far-reaching aims being pursued by Washington and the other major imperialist powers in their supposedly “humanitarian” intervention in Libya.

Zelikow is a former State Department counselor under Condoleezza Rice in the George W. Bush administration and a former advisor on the National Security Council under George H.W. Bush during the period of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. He is a trusted and experienced operative within the US political establishment, so much so that he was tapped to serve as executive director of the 9/11 Commission. In that position he was the individual most responsible for organizing a cover-up of the US government’s role in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Close to the Project for a New American Century and one of the authors of the Bush doctrine of preemptive war, Zelikow has intimate experience in both the theory and practice of US imperialism’s drive to impose its hegemony over the Middle East.

Zelikow begins his column by debunking the arguments of those on the Republican right who opposed the Libyan war as an example of “liberal interventionism.” He dismisses this concern, saying it is merely a misunderstanding “fed by some rhetoric, especially from the government.” The war, he writes, was launched because of Libya’s particular “history and a geography that well justified hard-headed calculations by the US, Britain, France and many other countries that they should seize this opportunity to help the rebels get rid of this particular demented regime.”

In other words, the major imperialist powers saw a set of circumstances in the Libyan events that allowed them to “seize the opportunity” to execute a military campaign for regime-change for the purpose of establishing firm control over the oil-rich North African nation.

In part, these circumstances were conditioned by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and their echo within the Libyan population in the form of ruthlessly repressed demonstrations against the Gaddafi regime. In part, they were determined by

Libya’s character: a country of less than 6.5 million people, sitting on top of the largest oil reserves on the African continent and with a long Mediterranean coastline directly facing southern Europe.

Having fought until the bitter end to keep the dictatorial regimes of Mubarak and Ben Ali in power in Egypt and Tunisia, the imperialists saw the opportunity to use the so-called “Arab Spring” as a cover for seizing control of Libya, even as they and the local ruling elites exploit the absence of revolutionary leadership to re-establish their domination in Tunisia and Egypt.

This is what gave rise to the war supposedly waged for “human rights” and to “protect Libyan civilians,” pretexts that Zelikow rightly dismisses as mere rhetoric.

As the ex-State Department-NSC official makes clear, Libya won’t be the end of this process. The Libyan war, he says “will renew a sense of momentum.” He continues: “The struggle in Syria, slowly escalating, will move even more into the foreground.”

In other words, what is at stake is not merely the takeover of a single country, as significant as that is, but rather the reordering of an entire region.

And who, according to Zelikow, is in the vanguard of this supposedly democratizing “Arab Spring?”

“Much of the drive in Arab spring policymaking is currently coming from the Persian Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar,” he writes. “It is their hour. The Saudi government is playing a critical role in the Arab diplomacy now isolating Syria. The UAE, with the Saudis, came up with the funds that allowed Egypt’s interim rulers to hold off the conditional packages being offered by the international financial institutions. The Qatari government has played a vital role in the Libyan revolution.”

The “Arab Spring” is “their hour?” These supposed champions of democracy and the liberation of the Arab masses are a collection of absolute monarchies, where oppositionists face torture, imprisonment without trial and even beheading. They rule over societies in which the vast majority of the working populations are oppressed immigrant laborers denied any rights whatsoever, and where women are denied fundamental rights.

These crusaders for “democracy” in Libya and Syria are, of course, the same dictatorial regimes that organized the military suppression of the nationwide protests in Bahrain that demanded democratic rights in opposition to the dictatorial rule of the Al-Khalifa dynasty. With tacit backing from Washington, scores have been killed, many hundreds arrested and thousands fired from their jobs in the continuing repression in Bahrain.

To declare this the “hour” of such odious regimes is to project a nightmare of repression and social retrogression for the peoples of the entire Arab world.

Zelikow follows up his paean to petrodollar-besotted monarchs of the Persian Gulf with an odd comment. “I would feel better,” he writes, “if France, Britain, the US and those three countries were having regular working group discussions at a senior level on a nearly daily basis to coordinate strategy. Perhaps they are.”

Whom does Zelikow think he is kidding? Not only is policy being “coordinated” at a senior level, Qatari special forces mercenaries have been working side-by-side with US, British and French intelligence agents, special operations troops and military “contractors” on the ground in Libya, organizing and directing the so-called rebel offensive. If these regimes are now touted as the vanguard of the “Arab Spring” it is because they are the most subservient to US policy in the Middle East.

What does this US foreign policy/intelligence insider see as the prospects for Libya and the broader Arab world? Will new repressive regimes representing the old ruling elites arise--as appears to be happening in Egypt or Tunisia? Will “Islamist extremists... take control?” Or will “more open societies along lines familiar in the West” emerge?

Zelikow suggests that a “new and distinctive” alternative may emerge, one that “doesn’t fit into these preconceived categories.”

“Consider the dilemmas Libya’s new leaders will face at the outset,” he writes. “Their economy relies overwhelmingly on the oil complex, which the state will want to control. Their politics will turn on the distribution of power and resources among several contending groups filling the vacuum left by the dictatorship’s demise. The leaders will be weary of fighting and chaos. Rather than re-impose a new dictatorship to force all into a single mould and pay for it with the oil and gas revenue, the natural course will be to make deals granting more autonomy to various communities and shares of the national revenue. This is not unusual. Multi-ethnic communities in countries such as Libya, Iraq and Syria are and will be experimenting with federal or perhaps even confederal solutions. In this part of the world, it is the ‘total state’ model itself that is crumbling, the decrepit son of decolonisation. That unitary, statist model has been the vehicle for all the cronyism and it is giving way to something new.”

Here, “something new” sounds suspiciously like something very old, or at least something out of the 19th and early 20th

centuries. What is proposed here is not a flowering of democratic autonomy, but rather the biggest imperialist carve-up of the Middle East since Britain and France imposed their system of colonial mandates in the aftermath of the First World War.

Having done away with the “unitary, statist model,” described by Zelikow as the “decrepit son of decolonization,” the road is clear for the outright recolonization of the region. Or, more accurately, most of the region. One hardly suspects that Zelikow is proposing an end to the “unitary, statist model” in Israel.

With the scrapping of the “statist model” in a country like Libya, one would presumably also get rid of the troublesome problem of state control of oil resources, opening the way for Exxon-Mobil, BP, Chevron and other energy conglomerates to claim direct ownership of the oil fields, taking control of production and pricing and freezing out rivals in China, Russia and India.

Zelikow concludes: “Outsiders can help all this, by offering information, ideas and incentives. But the outsiders will not be the deciders.” Of course, just as the NATO outsiders are merely “helping” the “rebels” in Libya.

Zelikow rose to prominence in US establishment circles during the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Stalinist bureaucracies. He then served as a senior security adviser during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991. He became an advocate for the policy that led to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a war that was made possible by the liquidation of the USSR. Now he is proposing a major escalation of that policy.

His column on Libya serves to confirm that the war there has nothing to do with humanitarianism or human rights, but represents the violent subjugation of a former colonial country. And it is a warning: Libya is only the beginning of an imperialist drive to reorder the entire Middle East. Given the conflicting interests between the major imperialist powers themselves, this process threatens to give rise to far bloodier conflicts in the foreseeable future.



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