

The destruction of Sirte

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The Libyan city of Sirte is being systematically destroyed by National Transitional Council “rebel” fighters and NATO fighter planes. The operation stands as a monumental war crime, for which primary responsibility rests with the leading forces behind the military intervention in Libya—US President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Sirte has been under siege for weeks. TNC forces have prevented all supplies from entering the city, including food, medicines, and other basic necessities. NATO bombs have rained down, together with a heavy and indiscriminate bombardment by TNC mortars, tank shells, and rockets. Basic infrastructure—including water, electricity, and sewerage systems—has been destroyed as part of the calculated effort to trigger a humanitarian crisis in the city and terrorise its inhabitants into submission.

Every building in Sirte, including apartment blocks, homes, hospitals, schools, and other civilian structures, has either been levelled or severely damaged by the “rebel” forces trying to finally take the city. Militiamen are looting homes, cars, and shops, with truckloads of residents’ stolen possessions now leaving Sirte every day.

A Reuters correspondent reported seeing a group of fighters firing machine guns at a safe in an electronics store for 15 minutes before they managed to open it and see what could be taken. Many homes, after they are looted, are being burned to the ground.

Journalists covering the brutal operation have been shocked by what they have witnessed. The BBC’s Wyre Davies reported: “This is almost a scorched earth policy. The pro-Gaddafi fighters defending this city won’t surrender, so Sirte is being systematically destroyed, block by block. Fighting is intense, incredibly destructive, and almost mind-numbing.” Reporters for the British *Telegraph* described Sirte as a “squalid ruin” that is

“reminiscent of the grimmest scenes from Grozny, towards the end of Russia’s bloody Chechen war.”

The destruction of Sirte raises other historical parallels—Guernica, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the obliteration by the fascist powers of other urban centres in the 1930s and ’40s.

All those responsible for the Libyan war ought to be charged with war crimes—beginning with Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy. These figures launched an unprovoked war of aggression, which was the principal charge laid against Germany’s Nazi leaders at the war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg. NATO claimed authorisation for the war in Libya on the pseudo-legal basis of UN Resolution 1973—but the “no fly zone” terms of this document were immediately flouted as soon as it was adopted.

The atrocities now being committed in Sirte arise directly out of the nature of the neo-colonial intervention itself. US imperialism and its European allies hijacked the anti-Gaddafi demonstrations that erupted last February, launching a regime change drive that was centrally aimed at capturing Libya’s enormous oil reserves and reasserting their domination of North Africa in the wake of the revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt that threatened Washington’s geostrategic standing across the region.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday visited Tripoli, declaring that Libya was “blessed with wealth and resources.” In discussions with TNC leaders, *Bloomberg* reported, she “promised assistance to diversify the oil-dominated economy.” Clinton said nothing about the bombardment of Sirte, other than to note continued “bloody fighting” in the country.

There are definite political calculations involved in the destruction of Sirte.

For the NATO powers, the violence is intended to serve as a deterrent to any resistance emerging within Libya to the new order now being established in Tripoli through the TNC client administration. The Sirte operation is also directed towards the governments of Syria and Iran, warning them about the kind of retaliatory measures they face if they defy US-European diktats. At the beginning of the NATO intervention in Libya, Sarkozy openly threatened that “every ruler, and especially every Arab ruler” could confront a similar attack.

The Obama administration also intends the destruction of Sirte to send a message to the Chinese government. China has rapidly increased its influence throughout Africa, including in Libya, becoming the continent’s largest trading partner and a major destination for its oil and mineral exports. Beijing has also cultivated diplomatic and military ties across the region, undermining the dominance of the US and the former colonial European powers. Libya has provided an opportunity for Washington to teach its powerful rival a lesson—that military force can be utilised to destroy any government with which China develops close economic and strategic relations at US expense.

If at any point during Libya’s civil war Gaddafi’s forces had done what the TNC fighters are doing now, there would have been blanket media coverage and howls of outrage from Washington, London, and Paris, including demands of charges for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet the crisis in Sirte is unfolding without a word of protest being raised in official political and media circles in the US and Europe.

The various “left” and liberal forces that have enthusiastically promoted the war on Libya as a worthy humanitarian mission, such as US Professor Juan Cole and the *Nation* magazine, have maintained a strict silence about the events in Sirte. None of them have sought to account for the fact that NATO’s “humanitarian” war—supposedly waged in order to prevent the possibility of civilians being killed in one city, Benghazi—has now led to the destruction of another city, with thousands of civilians likely killed and wounded.

Among these pro-war layers, French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy has spoken out about Sirte to defend the crimes being committed by NATO and the TNC.

Lévy played a key role in France earlier this year in agitating for the war, in order, he insisted, “to protect the civilians of Misrata, Sirte, and Benghazi.” He personally organised the first meeting between Sarkozy and members of the TNC. Now, an article titled “Justice for the Liberators of Sirte!” and published on the *Huffington Post* website, Lévy issues a grotesque diatribe against any criticism of what the TNC forces are doing in Sirte.

The celebrity philosopher dismisses evidence of the city’s systematic destruction as mere “rumours of violent acts against civilians” and “inevitable blunders.” Blaming the civilian population for their own plight, he insists that the TNC “held off for several weeks before giving the order to attack—enough time for those who wanted to and could to be evacuated.” Lévy ignores the fact that thousands of civilians, including the most vulnerable, had no way of escaping the fighting.

The entire piece is littered with blatant lies. At one point the writer denies the fact that TNC fighters deliberately shelled Sirte’s main hospital in order to prevent a Red Cross team delivering medical supplies. He declares that “when one of their shells hits the roof of a hospital, it’s horrifying, a monstrosity, a tragedy—but it’s also an error, an unpremeditated act.” Lévy concludes: “I continue to salute the dignity of these fighters of happenstance who, as they have from the first day, wage war but do not like it.”

Lévy’s stance on Sirte underscores the political function of the entire layer of upper-middle class “liberal” proponents of humanitarian war—mouthpieces for imperialist aggression.

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