

NATO imperialism and the Libya flood catastrophe

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More than 6,000 people are confirmed dead in the flooding across eastern Libya caused by Storm Daniel, which burst two dams and destroyed large parts of the port city of Derna. Many thousands are still missing and the confirmed death toll is expected to at least double as the remains of victims the flood swept out to sea wash back ashore.

This horrific catastrophe is not only the product of severe weather, intensified by climate change. It flows from the war NATO waged against Libya in 2011, which shattered the country and plunged it into civil war. Those who launched the NATO war in Libya or applauded it as a “humanitarian” intervention, and who today are backing a NATO war against Russia in Ukraine on similar grounds, bear direct political and moral responsibility for the Derna catastrophe.

Last year, hydrologist Abdelwanees Ashoor wrote articles warning that Derna’s dams were in poor condition, and that a major flood would be “likely to cause one of the two dams to collapse.” Ashoor continued, “If a huge flood happens, the result will be catastrophic for the people of the wadi and the city.”

No repairs were done, however, because of the civil war that has raged between rival governments in eastern and western Libya since NATO destroyed Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in the 2011 war. International Crisis Group official Claudia Gazzini told France24: “In 10 years since the fall of the Gaddafi regime—in the following 10 years of wars, policy rivalry and isolation—both governments have completely neglected the infrastructure.”

What is systematically covered up, however, is the NATO powers’ role in instigating the civil war that created the conditions for the flood. Top NATO officials launched the 2011 war in Libya, relying on the professional liars in the major media, the academic establishment and the middle-class pseudo-left parties to sell the war as a crusade for democracy and human rights. These forces all have blood on their hands.

This includes then-US President Barack Obama, then-UK Prime Minister David Cameron and then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose governments pressed the hardest for the 2011 war in Libya. Also complicit are the major media outlets such as the *New York Times* and CNN, which peddle CIA-dictated propaganda, as well as legions of cowardly and

conformist academics like Professor Juan Cole of the University of Michigan and pseudo-left political operatives like Professor Gilbert Achcar of France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). They backed the war in Libya then, as they back NATO’s Ukraine war now.

NATO launched the war in Libya in February 2011, claiming that only its intervention could keep Gaddafi from killing protesters in eastern Libya, the same region now devastated by floods. To topple Gaddafi, NATO armed a collection of rival Islamist and tribal militias, led by figures such as Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader Abdelhakim Bekhadj, CIA asset Khalifa Haftar, and leaders of the Misrata Brigades. It then provided its proxy forces with air support, bombing Libyan army forces that fought the NATO-backed insurgent militias.

The war ended after seven months of fighting that claimed an estimated 25,000 lives, as NATO bombed Tripoli and Sirte, Gaddafi’s home city. On October 20, 2011, a gang of militiamen that included French intelligence agents captured, tortured and murdered Gaddafi in the ruins of Sirte. Then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gloated on the day of Gaddafi’s death, laughing and telling reporters: “We came, we saw, he died.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the imperialist interests motivating the war on oil-rich Libya and exposed the lies used to justify the war. Examining the case of professor and Middle East blogger Juan Cole, David North pointed to the pro-imperialist political amnesia that afflicted a broad layer of petty-bourgeois supporters of the war. North wrote:

Those who are hailing the attack on Libya as a triumph for the cause of human rights seem to have no recollection at all of the monstrous role played by the United States in attacking and subverting countries that interfered, in one way or another, with its strategic political and economic interests. It is not only the past that is forgotten (Vietnam, the savage war of the “Contras” in Nicaragua, the fomenting of civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, the overthrow and murder of Lumumba in the Congo, the longstanding support for the apartheid regime in South Africa, the invasion of

Iraq); the present is all but ignored. The pro-war “left” assigns to the United States the task of removing Gaddafi for firing on his people, even as Predator drones rain missiles down upon Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing people every day.

As the war began, Cole attacked left-wing opposition to it, declaring that the left “should avoid making ‘foreign intervention’ an absolute taboo,” and adding, “To make ‘anti-imperialism’ trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions.” To underscore his enthusiastic support for the US and NATO, he said, “If NATO needs me, I’m there.”

Similarly, Achcar, a professor at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and member of the Pabloite NPA, who functions as an adviser to the British army, admitted that the war aimed to plunder Libya’s oil resources, but backed NATO anyway.

“The Western response, of course, smacks of oil,” Achcar said in 2011. However, he argued, this was not a reason to oppose the war:

Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it. The attack by Gaddafi’s forces was hours or at most days away. You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians.

And once the Gaddafi regime had been toppled, *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof traveled to Libya and boasted that the NATO war had turned him into a hero in Tripoli. In a column titled “Thank You America!”, Kristof wrote:

Americans are not often heroes in the Arab world, but as nonstop celebrations unfold here in the Libyan capital, I keep running into ordinary people who learn where I’m from and then fervently repeat variants of the same phrase: “Thank you America!”

In reality, the NATO victory in Libya resulted in a human tragedy. The country again plunged into civil war in 2012, after oil-rich eastern Libya tried to secede and cut its own deals with the major NATO oil corporations. Along with the escalation of civil war over the ensuing decade, there have been tens of thousands more deaths. Economic production has fallen by half, from \$92 billion in 2012 to \$46 billion last year, while gross domestic product per capita—roughly speaking, average

personal income—has fallen from \$15,765 to \$6,716.

All the officials and professors who argued that the NATO conquest of Libya would produce peace, prosperity and democracy bear responsibility for the tens of thousands of deaths and incalculable human misery that have resulted from the war they backed and actively promoted. Cole claimed he supported the war because it created the prospect of “allowing Libyans to have a normal life.” But the war supposedly waged for democracy and normality devastated Libya and led to the reintroduction of slavery in the country.

In 2017, citing multiple reports in world media, Amnesty International concluded that in camps the European Union (EU) set up in Libya to detain refugees trying to flee to Europe, prisoners are beaten, raped, murdered and sold at auction into slavery.

Today, what do the war propagandists have to say about the catastrophe in Derna and the role their support for war has played? Cole and Achcar, on their blogs, have said nothing. They have left the disaster they helped create in Libya behind. Achcar has moved on to advocating support for the latest NATO war—this time, against Russia.

The war against Russia in Ukraine flows directly out of the spiral of military escalation launched by NATO. After the war in Libya, the NATO powers soon mobilized the Islamist networks they had used against Gaddafi as proxy forces to wage war in Syria. In September 2013, Russian warships based at Sevastopol intervened to block NATO ships from bombing Syria. Less than five months later, Washington and Berlin backed the February 2014 Maidan coup in Ukraine and demanded that Russia hand over Sevastopol and the entire Crimean Peninsula to the newly installed pro-NATO regime in Kiev.

The decisive task facing workers and youth around the world is to build an international movement against imperialism to halt this spiral of military escalation, which is setting into motion an ever-greater chain of catastrophes. As the NATO imperialist powers escalate the war in Ukraine and conspire to divide up Russia and grab its natural resources, they again present themselves as defenders of “democracy” and “freedom”—this time, against Russian President Vladimir Putin. In reality, the rape of Libya and the catastrophe in Derna are imperishable warnings on the disastrous consequences of NATO victory in its wars of plunder.



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