

# ARAB SPRING: HOPE, BUT THE KILLING GOES ON; NO ROOM FOR EUPHORIA

## BOMBING FOR PEACE



John Hilary

NATO's engagement in Libya has run into the desert sand faster even than the invasion of Iraq did. Support for the bombing started to unravel within days of the UN Security Council vote that authorised all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack. The secretary general of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, whose support had been crucial in persuading China and Russia not to veto allied action against Libya, recanted within just 24 hours of the commencement of hostilities. The five BRICS nations of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa issued a statement denouncing the military action and backing the African Union proposal for a political solution.

International concern mounted still further as NATO leaders swiftly moved beyond the UN mandate of protecting civilians to openly advocating regime change. The press article by Cameron, Obama and Sarkozy carried by the *Times*, *Washington Post* and *Le Figaro* on 15 April stated explicitly that Gaddafi must go and go for good, and pledged that their forces would continue operations until his removal. The three leaders appear supremely indifferent to the fact that military intervention to bring about regime change in another country is illegal under international law.

Further contravention of the UN mandate of protecting civilians came with the decision to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) for bombing raids on areas held by pro-Gaddafi forces. The British media continue to parrot the official line that drones offer the possibility of targeting military installations more accurately – minimising the risk of civilian casualties, according to the BBC formulation. The reality could not be more different. The UN's special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Philip Alston, has warned that the use of such indiscriminate weapons may well be a violation of international humanitarian and human rights law.

### Responsibility to protect

The NATO assault on Libya reveals serious problems with the principle of humanitarian intervention itself. Following the Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which half a million Tutsi were massacred while the international community looked on, the call for outside intervention to protect civilian populations from such atrocities grew more and more vocal. The subsequent crises in Bosnia, Kosovo and Darfur added further impetus to the conviction that something must be done.

The principle of humanitarian intervention was given normative expression in 2001 as the responsibility to protect civilian populations from mass atrocities, or R2P for short. This responsibility was adopted by the UN's 2005 World Summit, which committed the international community to take collective action in order to protect civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity if and when peaceful means to prevent such crimes prove inadequate. The summit gave ultimate power to approve any such use of force to the UN Security Council, in keeping with Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

It should be noted that neither the invasion of Afghanistan nor the Iraq war had been cast as instances of humanitarian intervention. In the case of Afghanistan, US and UK representatives argued to the UN Security Council – which had given no mandate for military action – that their operations were acts of self-defence under the UN Charter in response to the attacks of 9/11. The pretext given for the Iraq war was, infamously, Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction. Tony Blair's retrospective attempts to justify the invasion on humanitarian grounds fooled nobody.

In both instances, of course, the true causes of war ran deeper. The geopolitical importance of Afghanistan in relation to Iran and the resource-rich countries of Central Asia had already singled it out as a potential target even before 2001. In Iraq's case, the primary strategic goals of the invasion were to maintain a low and stable oil price and to secure access for Western companies to the country's giant oil fields.

### Self-interested intervention

Libya boasts the largest proven oil reserves of any country in Africa, as well as significant reserves of natural gas. When BP returned to the country in 2007 through an exploration and production agreement worth an initial \$900m, chief executive Tony Hayward called it BP's single biggest exploration commitment. Shell had already signed its own \$200m gas exploration deal when sanctions on Libya were lifted in 2004. No fewer than 35 foreign oil and gas companies are active in Libya, including several national oil companies from NATO member states.

It is childish to suggest that NATO's intervention in Libya was undertaken without reference to the country's natural resources. NATO member states are not disinterested observers but key players with strategic investments in Libya and across the wider Arab world. The fact that the protagonists have been able to cloak their actions in terms of humanitarian intervention does nothing to disguise the underlying agenda of securing key supplies of oil and gas.

This points to the central problem with the responsibility to protect, namely that the decision to intervene will always be taken according to the political and strategic interests of those prepared to commit their armed forces. To pretend that the UN Security Council represents a safety mechanism above such considerations is disingenuous. Indeed, NATO forces now treat the Security Council as no more than a convenient fig leaf for their most aggressive ambitions.

Advocates of humanitarian intervention need to address these realities head on. The responsibility to protect civilians from war crimes or other atrocities has degenerated into a convenient excuse for selected acts of aggression, while other equally pressing human rights crises go untouched. NATO is not a benign force for peace in the world but a coalition whose leaders take military action for their own political and strategic ends. We must challenge such imperialism, not legitimise it.

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## IRAN: A DILEMMA FOR PEACE ACTIVISTS



Potkin Azarmehr

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a brutal dictatorship where an ever diminishing circle of clerics and revolutionary guard generals are intent on holding on to the reins of power and Iran's economy - a theocracy which has jailed, tortured and killed trade unionists, journalists, academics, students, peaceful protesters, human rights lawyers, women activists and minorities.

However, there are those who are still duped that it is some kind of popular anti-imperialist regime and attempt to make excuses for it.

Peace activists who are not duped nevertheless face a dilemma. How can they oppose the Islamic Republic and still not identify themselves with US/Israeli hawks? Is there anything they can do to help bring the regime down without helping warmongers?

First, what peace activists should not do. The very minimum is for them not to take part in or support the regime's propaganda exercises. Every time non-Iranian peace activists take part in Islamic Republic propaganda exercises, the events are broadcast on state TV. The purpose of these broadcasts is to break the spirit of the Iranian people. The state is trying to tell the people in Iran: look, you can protest and demonstrate as much as you like, you can go on strike, you can shed blood but no one will know or care about you; instead they are on our side! Such expensive propaganda exercises are designed with the sole objective of breaking the spirit of the Iranian people.

Every year the Iranian regime organises a demonstration throughout the streets of London, known as the Al-Quds march. Supposedly it is in support of the Palestinian struggle and again many peace activists who support the Palestinian cause turn up for the march, not knowing that they are actually taking part in an Iranian government propaganda exercise. Its sole aim is to promote the Iranian regime. Pictures of the Iranian Supreme Leader and other Islamic Republic figures are paraded in this march. The whole event is organised by Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) which is funded and directed by the Islamic Republic. Few Palestinians take part in the march and the majority are naive individuals who have not seen through the propaganda. During the march, slogans are chanted against Iran's dissidents and leaders of the Green Movement. How this is supposed to help the Palestinian cause is difficult to see: a regime which has not liberated its own people and has brought them nothing other than tyranny, misery and poverty will not liberate the Palestinians nor any other people.

Islamic Republic's English speaking media outlet, Press TV, is yet another of regime's platforms which should be avoided by human rights activists. At a time when Iranian journalists languish in jails and foreign reporters are banned from Iran, to appear on Press TV is nothing other than a seal of approval for the tyranny of the Supreme Leader.

The very top priority of Iranian pro-democracy activists should be to solicit the help of international public opinion, which should never be underestimated. This is different from

appealing to foreign governments for intervention, it is an appeal to the decent people in the free world who seek justice for all, to stand with the Iranian people. Never underestimate the power of the simplest solidarity message. Any dissident from anywhere around the world will tell you their worst fear was to be forgotten. Tyrannies know this too well and they go out of their way to induce the prisoner of conscience into thinking that they are all alone and forgotten. Where physical torture fails to break the spirit of a prisoner of conscience, the psychological feeling of abandonment can break the strongest of spirits.

What peace activists around the world can do for the people of Iran, is no different from what was done for Vietnam or South Africa. Whereas in South Africa, there was a racial apartheid, Islamic Republic is none other than a religious apartheid. It therefore demands the same global mass resolve to break its ability to repress the voices of freedom.

For those who fear any attempt against the Islamic Republic will help the hawks, the best way to defend Iran against any military intervention is by helping bring about a secular democracy that respects people's basic human rights. This will completely disarm the hawks. Political Islamism was in fact created by the hawks against the Soviet expansion. Political Islam and Western Militarist Hawks need and feed off each other. Much of what we see as this confrontation is nothing other than rhetoric and balderdash. When Bush was including Iran in his "axis of evil", Dick Cheney's Haliburton company was signing contracts with the ruling regime and Jack Straw was calling the Islamic Republic, "the West's important partner in the fight against terrorism".

The Supreme Leader of Iran is allowed to have a representative office in London, the Islamic Centre in Maida Vale. So do other reactionary repressive holocaust denying clerics such as Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, who has a whole complex in Harrow Road. Many of the pillars of the regime and major human rights abusers in Iran regularly travel to UK for holidays, business trips and medical treatment.

The hawks, if anything, justify their existence because there is an entity called the Islamic Republic. Israeli extremists justify their actions by saying Israel is the only democracy in the region. What would be more dangerous to Israel's hawks and extremists if this were no longer the case and there were other democratic regimes which respected the human rights of their own citizens?

Standing up for human rights in any part of the world is a noble and worthwhile thing to do. The people in Iran have the same flesh and blood as you do, they feel pain in the same way as you do, they want the same freedoms you take for granted, they want to live. To say helping them will fuel the hawks and war is nothing but a feeble excuse.

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