

# The American Conservative

## The “Liberation Movement” in Libya

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On May 5, 2011 @ 12:38 pm In

These migrants, almost all of them black Africans who found refuge from such places as Chad, Eritrea and Sudan’s ravaged Darfur region in Colonel Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya, say they are targets of rebels in the east, where they have all too often been mistaken for mercenaries in the pay of the colonel.

Their journey to Libya’s border is perilous. Many say they have witnessed massacres of other black Africans. Even the wounded are not welcome. Ahmed Muhammad Zakaria, a 20-year-old Chadian living in Benghazi, was shot in the leg by rebels, but says people in the local hospital, rather than treat him, told him to go to Egypt. A ten-year-old boy infected with HIV from a blood transfusion in Libya was told that he and his family were no longer welcome in the rebel-held east. “Burn them all,” said one Benghazi native of the blacks fleeing Libya. ~[The Economist](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

The rebels must have missed [Anne-Marie Slaughter’s lecture on values](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and Juan Cole’s [public relations advice](#) <sup>[3]</sup>.

One of the reasons why it is misguided to take sides in another country’s civil war is that it implicates the intervening government directly or indirectly in the excesses of the side it supports. As civil wars unfortunately tend to produce atrocities, reprisals, and extra-judicial killings, picking a side in such a conflict entails lending support to one armed faction engaged in these actions. It largely means watching the principle of the “responsibility to protect” be abused to enable other crimes, and this is particularly true when the intervening governments are reluctant to do more than attack from the air and sea. As in Kosovo, there is no control over the forces that the U.S. and NATO are supporting, but on account of our intervention we now share in the responsibility for what happens to the people under the nominal control of the rebel authorities. Humanitarian interventions often end up intensifying conflicts and increasing insecurity for the civilian population, which is why they must be done in the last resort if they are to be done at all. In the Libyan case, the reprisals aren’t even always directed at actual regime loyalists, but instead the rebels have targeted the most vulnerable civilians in eastern Libya out of the mistaken belief (or convenient excuse) that they have confused these migrant workers with African mercenaries. It wouldn’t be significantly better if the people being targeted were regime loyalists or mercenaries, because we would still be talking about massacres of prisoners.

Ted Galen Carpenter has [reminded](#) <sup>[4]</sup> us of the convenient double standards that past administrations have applied in condemning and opposing one side’s atrocities and ignoring the very same sort of atrocities by the other side:

A glaring example was the response to Operation Storm, the military offensive that the Croatian government launched in August 1995 against rebel Serb forces in the Krajina region of Croatia. That operation ultimately led to the flight or expulsion of some 200,000 Serb inhabitants—in some cases involving families that had lived in the region for centuries.

One would think that this action constituted ethnic cleansing at least as much as anything Serb forces had done in Bosnia, but the United States viewed matters differently. Washington supported Zagreb’s offensive, with President Clinton admitting in his memoirs that he “rooted” for the Croatian action. Nowhere in that book does he mention the unfortunate fate of Serb civilians in the region. And it appears that the U.S. government did more than root. There are indications that it assisted the offensive by providing intelligence information to the Croatian military.

Unlike Operation Storm, what is happening to migrant workers in eastern Libya doesn't even have any remote connection to the stated political or military goals of the rebels. It appears to be little more needless slaughter carried out by some of the people Western governments have been supporting in the name of protecting civilians from slaughter.

P.S. Earlier thoughts on the “liberation movement” in Libya [here](#) <sup>[5]</sup>.

URL to article: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison/2011/05/05/the-liberation-movement-in-libya-2/>

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## 2 Comments To "The “Liberation Movement” in Libya"

**#1 Comment** By [Damir Marusic](#) On May 5, 2011 @ 1:38 pm

I'm not you're on board with Carpenter, Daniel, given what you've been writing up until now, but I do think that the argument from consistency on these matters is very much besides the point. The important argument for not going into Libya is not that the people we're supporting aren't living up to our standards of decency—though it is fun and productive to mock people for preaching Western standards to guerillas—but rather that we have precious little to gain from them coming to power, and indeed that it looks like we have much to lose in terms of creating a basket-case state we'll need to triage for years and perhaps decades to come.

A final dig against Carpenter:

Washington has been far too promiscuous in its use of foreign policy double standards over the decades, and it has paid a high price for such cynicism.

No, we haven't. The high prices were paid when we've followed our hearts rather than our minds in these matters.

**#2 Comment** By [Daniel Larison](#) On May 5, 2011 @ 2:03 pm

I'm in agreement with Carpenter that there have been glaring double standards. What is most relevant here is the glaring double standard applied in the same conflict where U.S. intervention has been justified largely or solely on humanitarian grounds.

What I would add to this post is that double standards don't bother me that much. What bothers me is the idea that we are obliged to intervene in other nations' conflicts ostensibly to prevent atrocities from happening, and then for the sake of continuing the interventionist policy justified purely on humanitarian grounds we are then obliged to overlook or even justify the atrocities of the side we have backed up. People use the moralizing rhetoric to pull us into these conflicts, and then they tend to shrug off whatever “our” side does as unfortunate but necessary. The inconsistency of standards *within the same conflict* makes clear that there never should have been an intervention.

There are many other good reasons why the U.S. and European governments should not have gone into Libya, and those are more important, but what I want to point out is that the “values” argument for the intervention doesn't withstand very much scrutiny.

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URLs in this post:

[1] The Economist: [http://www.economist.com/node/18652159?story\\_id=18652159](http://www.economist.com/node/18652159?story_id=18652159)

[2] Anne-Marie Slaughter’s lecture on values: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison/2011/04/01/revolutionary-values/>

[3] public relations advice: <http://www.juancole.com/2011/04/misrata-reprieved.html>

[4] reminded: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/the-hypocritical-strain-us-foreign-policy-5262>

[5] here: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison/2011/03/30/the-liberation-movement-in-libya/>

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