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Reason Number One: Regime change

This was announced as the real objective the moment French president Nicolas Sarkozy took the extraordinary step of recognizing the rebels in Benghazi as "the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people". This recognition was an extraordinary violation of all diplomatic practice and principles. It meant non-recognition of the existing Libyan government and its institutions, which, contrary to the magical notions surrounding the word "dictator", cannot be reduced to the personality of one strongman. A major European nation, France, swept aside all those institutions to proclaim that an obscure group of rebels in a traditionally rebellious part of Libya constituted the North African nation's legitimate government.

Since factually this was clearly not true, it could only be the proclamation of an objective to be reached by war. The French announcement was equivalent to a declaration of war against Libya, a war to defeat Kadhafi and put the mysterious rebels in power in his place.

False Pretext Number One: "to protect civilians"

The falsity of this pretext is obvious, first of all, because the UN Resolution authorizing military action "to protect civilians" was drawn up by France – whose objective was clearly regime change – and its Western allies. Had the real concern of the UN Security Council been to "protect innocent lives", it would have, could have, should have sent a strong neutral observer mission to find out what was really happening in Libya. There was no proof of rebel claims that the Kadhafi regime was slaughtering civilians. Had there been visible proof of such atrocities, we can be sure that they would have been shown regularly on prime time television. We have seen no such proof. A UN fact-finding mission could have very rapidly set the record straight,

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and the Security Council could then have acted on the basis of factual information rather than of claims by rebels seeking international aid for their cause. Instead, the Security Council, now little more than an instrument of Western powers, rushed ahead with sanctions, referral of alleged present or expected "crimes against humanity" to the International Criminal Court, and finally an authorization of a "no-fly zone" which Western powers were certain to interpret as a license to wage all-out war against Libya.

Once the United States and its leading NATO allies are authorized to "protect civilians", they do so with the instruments they have: air strikes; bombing and cruise missiles. Air strikes, bombing and cruise missiles are not designed to "protect civilians" but rather to destroy military targets, which inevitably leads to killing civilians. Aside from such "collateral damage", what right do we have to kill Libyan military personnel manning airports and other Libyan defense facilities? What have they done to us?

Reason Number Two: Because it's easy

With NATO forces bogged down in Afghanistan, certain alliance leaders (but not all of them) could think it would be a neat idea to grab a quick and easy victory in a nice little "humanitarian war". This, they can hope, could revive enthusiasm for military operations and increase the flagging popularity of politicians able to strut around as champions of "democracy" and destroyers of "dictators". Libya looks like an easy target. There you have a huge country, mostly desert, with only about six million inhabitants. The country's defense installations are all located along the Mediterranean coast, within easy reach of NATO country fighter jets and US cruise missiles. Libyan armed forces are small, weak and untested. It looks like a pushover, not quite as easy as Grenada but no harder than Serbia. Sarkozy and company can hope to strut their victory strut in short order.

False Pretext Number Two: Arabs asked for this war

On March 12, the Arab League meeting in Cairo announced that it backed a no-fly zone in Libya. This provided cover for the French-led semi-NATO operation. "We are responding to the demands of the Arab world", they could claim. But which Arab world? On the one hand, Sarkozy brazenly presented his crusade against Kadhafi as a continuation of the democratic uprisings in the Arab world against their autocratic leaders, while at the same time pretending to respond to the demand of... the most autocratic of those leaders, namely the Gulf State princes, themselves busily suppressing their own democratic uprisings. (It is not known exactly how the

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Arab League reached that decision, but Syria and Algeria voiced strong objections.)

The Western public was expected not to realize that those Arab leaders have their own reasons for hating Kadhafi, which have nothing to do with the reasons for hating him voiced in the West. Kadhafi has openly told them off to their faces, pointing to their betrayal of Palestine, their treachery, their hypocrisy. Last year, incidentally, former British MP George Galloway recounted how, in contrast to the Egyptian government's obstruction of aid to Gaza, his aid caravan had had its humanitarian cargo doubled during a stopover in Libya. Kadhafi long ago turned his back on the Arab world, considering its leaders hopeless, and turned to Africa.

While the Arab League's self-serving stance against Kadhafi was hailed in the West, little attention was paid to the African Union's unanimous opposition to war against the Libyan leader. Kadhafi has invested huge amounts of oil revenues in sub-Saharan Africa, building infrastructure and investing in development. The Western powers that overthrow him will continue to buy Libyan oil as before. The major difference could be that the new rulers, put in place by Europe, will follow the example of the Arab League sheikhs and shift their oil revenues from Africa to the London stock exchange and Western arms merchants.

Real Reason Number Three: Because Sarkozy followed BHL's advice

On March 4, the French literary dandy Bernard-Henri Lévy held a private meeting in Benghazi with Moustapha Abdeljalil, a former justice minister who has turned coats to become leader of the rebel "National Transition Council". That very evening, BHL called Sarkozy on his portable telephone and got his agreement to receive the NTC leaders. The meeting took place on March 10 in the Elysée palace in Paris. As reported in Le Figaro by veteran international reporter Renaud Girard, Sarkozy thereupon announced to the delighted Libyans the plan that he had concocted with BHL: recognition of the NTC as sole legitimate representative of Libya, the naming of a French ambassador to Benghazi, precision strikes on Libyan military airports, with the blessings of the Arab League (which he had already obtained). The French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, was startled to learn of this dramatic turn in French diplomacy after the media.

Kadhafi explained at length after the uprising began that he could not be called upon to resign, because he held no official office. He was, he insisted, only a "guide", to whom the Libyan people could turn for advice on controversial questions.

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It turns out the French also have an unofficial spiritual guide: Bernard-Henri Lévy. While Kadhafi wears colorful costumes and dwells in a tent, BHL wears impeccable white shirts open down his manly chest and hangs out in the Saint Germain des Près section of Paris. Neither was elected. Both exercise their power in mysterious ways.

In the Anglo-American world, Bernard-Henri Lévy is regarded as a comic figure, much like Kadhafi. His "philosophy" has about as many followers as the Little Green Book of the Libyan guide. But BHL also has money, lots of it, and is the friend of lots more. He exercises enormous influence in the world of French media, inviting journalists, writers, show business figures to his vacation paradise in Marrakech, serving on the board of directors of the two major "center-left" daily newspaper, Libération and Le Monde. He writes regularly in whatever mainstream publication he wants, appears on whatever television channel he chooses. By ordinary people in France, he is widely detested. But they cannot hope for a UN Security Council resolution to get rid of him.

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