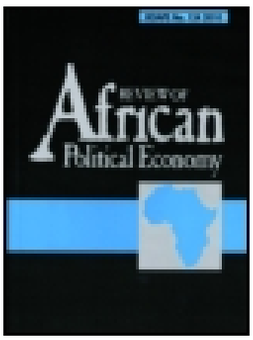

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The war *and* the economy: the gradual destruction of Libya

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ABSTRACT

This article questions dominant analyses about Libya's present 'war economy' and 'statelessness', which are often deployed to explain the country's ongoing destruction. By reinterpreting the history of the past as the failure of Libya to implement neoliberal reforms, these accounts trivialise its anti-imperialist history. The article reflects on the role that war and militarism play in the US-led imperialist structure, tracing the gradual unmaking of Libya from the progressive revolutionary era, towards its transformation into a comprador state and an outpost for global class war. In doing so, it moves the focus away from Libya's 'war economy' to examine the war *and* the economy, linking Libya's fate to the geo-economic and geopolitical forces at the core of US-led imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Capitalism; Libya; US-led imperialism; militarism; political economy; war

MOTS-CLÉS

Capitalisme ; Libye ; impérialisme mené par les États-Unis ; militarisme ; economie politique ; guerre

La guerre *et* l'économie : la destruction progressive de la Libye

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article remet en question les analyses dominantes sur l'actuelle « économie de guerre » de la Libye et sur son identité de « non-État ou sans-État » (statelessness), termes déployés pour expliquer la destruction en cours du pays. En réinterprétant l'histoire du passé comme l'échec de la Libye à mettre en œuvre des réformes néo-libérales, ces récits banalisent son histoire anti-impérialiste. L'article se penche sur le rôle que la guerre et le militarisme jouent dans la structure impérialiste dirigée par les États-Unis, et retrace le démantèlement progressif de la Libye, de l'ère révolutionnaire progressiste vers sa transformation en État comprador et en avant-poste de guerre de classe mondiale. Ce faisant, il détourne l'attention de « l'économie de guerre » de la Libye pour examiner la guerre *et* l'économie, liant le sort de la Libye aux forces géo-économiques et politiques qui sont au cœur de l'impérialisme dirigé par les États-Unis.

Introduction

This article analyses how permanent military intervention became integral to the existence of the post-colonial state in Libya, and how the country became the outpost of a global class war. Since the events of 2011 that brought the collapse of the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab *al-Jamāhīrīyah* (Republic of the Masses), the country suffers 'from interlinked political, security and economic crises that are weakening state

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institutions […] a fertile environment for the development of a pervasive war economy dependent on violence' (Eaton 2018, 1). The blossoming literature focusing on war economies tends to represent the ongoing conflict in Libya as the result of long-established local dynamics that continue to haunt the country's potential to bring the war to a halt, restore stability and embrace the fruits of globalisation.[1] The article demonstrates that these analyses isolate the progressive Libyan social formation from the imperialist interstate system. Developing a critique of the main limitations of these analyses, this research proposes to adopt a new conceptual lens based on a materialist understanding of the state and of class relations. It then goes on to apply this framework and recount the story of how permanent military intervention became integral to the gradual destruction of Libya. In so doing, the article departs from explaining the 'war economy' in Libya and moves to examine the war *and* the economy, linking Libya's trajectory to the geo-economic and political forces at the core of US-led imperialism.

Libya's 'statelessness' and 'war economy'

The prevailing narrative proposed by policy think tanks argues that since 2011 Libya has not merely descended into 'total violence' and social fragmentation, but has also come to be dominated by various armed groups who profit from the political turmoil (Cole 2015; Eaton 2018; Eaton et al. 2019; Lacher 2018; Lacher and Cole 2014; Pack 2020). Think tanks observe that armed groups rely on a wide range of illegal activities and economic practices to finance themselves and co-opt their allies, including corruption, extortion, confiscation of private properties, smuggling of oil-refined products and capital flight to foreign countries (Williams 2019). The prevailing narrative argues that these activities have been gradually destroying the country's formal economy. Local armed groups have begun to compensate for the inability of the state to provide resources, services and – most importantly – security to the population (Eaton 2018). Tripoli, the capital city, has witnessed the emergence of a Mexico-like 'cartel', where four militias have allied in order to establish the basis for a functioning monopoly of violence (Lacher 2018). From 2012 to early 2014, the primary source of finance for militias was funds specifically allocated from the defence and interior ministries, which covered the salaries of individual militiamen. By inflating payrolls and operating expenditures, militia leaders and their political allies were able to accumulate wealth and went on to partly reinvest it in heavy weapons and other capital-intensive equipment (Lacher and Cole 2014), thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of violence. However, as state funding contracted, armed groups started to search for alternative sources of funding, becoming embedded in the socio-economic structures.

Nowadays, militia groups have come to control rubbish dumps, egg-poultry production and medical clinics, as revealed by a document leaked by a militia to uncover the abuses of a competitor (Zaptia 2019). This embeddedness has placed them in a situation of economic privilege. However, fraudulent activities linked to obtaining letters of access to credit have been their most significant source of profits (Pack 2019b). Armed groups are not the only type of actor that participates in the formation and emergence of these 'networks of privilege' (Heydemann 2004). The operations of these networks of privilege are sustained through complex webs of complicity, mutual benefit, and coercion, which involve a vast array of political, economic and social actors. At times, branch managers

and business people are the first ones to link up with militias in order to obtain letters of credit.

Furthermore, the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar and controlling most of the country's territory, also engages in these activities and – compared to the militias in Tripoli – has gone a step further. In 2016, the LNA institutionalised its control of resources through the creation of a public body called 'The Military Investment and Public Works Committee' (Noria Research 2019). This institution undertakes predatory economic activities under the umbrella of 'national security', thus justifying confiscation of private properties, extortion from private economic actors and takeover of public projects. These practices are then followed by the imposition of monopolies over the smuggling of hard currency and refined fuel products, which further enable the LNA to survive and maintain power by paying off its supporters (Williams 2019), acquiring weapons from international and regional allies (Emirates Leaks 2019; PAX 2017).

The most important consideration of these analyses lies in how the current 'war economy' in Libya is described as an effective prolongation of or return to Mu'ammar Qaddafi's stateless and rentier *al-Jamāhīrīyah*. Built by using income from Libya's natural resources, Qaddafi forged 'a system of patronage and dependence that did not build modern state institutions but rather sought to embed pre-existing social formations within state structures' (Eaton 2018). While the regime maintained its legitimacy without any accountability from social forces and had thus no democratic values, it was also sustained through alliances with traditional networks of tribe, family or sects as the most effective levers for the distribution of oil revenues. Therefore, the regime required the creation of strong security apparatuses used to suppress and silence the population in a typical neo-patrimonial style (Schlumberger 2008). Libya under Qaddafi opted for the creation of limited access orders, that is 'systems in which order is based on political elites appropriating for themselves privileged control over parts of the economy, each getting some share of the rents' (Springborg 2020, 62). The regime deliberately developed semi-independent economic institutions, which mirrored a complex rentier system, not a market economy (Pack 2020; 2019a).

This type of scholarly analysis attributes Libya's fragmentation and destruction almost exclusively to historically self-inflicted, internal political dynamics. By doing so, it lacks historical depth and erases the past *al-Jamahiriyah*'s anti-imperialist political ideology and economic practices. Depicting the current situation solely as a result of Libya's refusal to embrace neoliberal economic reforms (Massad 2019), this scholarship breaks down 42 years of complex anti-imperialist politics and economics, condensing it into a uniform and a rather amorphous creature: the Libyan 'authoritarian' or 'rentier' state, or Libya's 'stateless society'. The notion of statelessness is predicated on problematic assumptions which are at once Weberian, Eurocentric and orientalist. They are orientalist because the idea of an unstable, indecipherable periphery 'constitutes the symbolic Other against which a stable European Self can be posited' (Manchanda 2017, 13). Reminiscent of orientalist writings, the idea of statelessness signals the lack of a 'normal', functioning political order that inevitably leads to deviant forms of authority. They are Eurocentric because a state's failure or success is measured against the linear, idealised model of European state formation and according to its degree of participation into 'liberal globalisation'. They are Weberian in that their understanding of state's failure is linked to the ability to control the necessary means to coerce (monopoly of violence) and produce welfare

(distribution of goods and services). Therefore, these conceptual tropes provide a very inaccurate description of the metamorphosis of the Libyan state throughout the years from a progressive revolution, which was capable of mediating the disparate interests of the proletarian class vis-à-vis global capital, into a comprador state, increasingly repressive and domestically illegitimate for a great part of the population.

The present research departs from these analyses as it traces the gradual incapacitation of the Libyan state from a historical materialist approach that conceptualises the state dialectically, emphasising its social formation vis-à-vis the global market conditions and the imperialist inter-state system. Avoiding methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2003), this allows the reframing of two interrelated processes.

The first is a systematic analysis of the role of global forces which takes into account how the historical development and political trajectory of the periphery – that is, countries of the global South – does not take place in a vacuum, but rather in a capitalist world-system (Amin 1976). The second is a systematic account of the centrality of war and militarism in the project of US-led imperialism (Kadri 2019; 2015; 2016). Wars – most specifically, imperialist wars – are often explained outside the circuits of capital, which are the flows through which capital produces surplus value, in the forms of money and commodities (Marx 1992 [1893]). The connection between wars and processes of domination and capital accumulation is either denied or loosely explained as an inherent disposition of all empires. Kadri connects war to the theory of value in order to trace how 'the degradation of nature by capital, the incarnation of the impersonal and objective forces of history, is meant to control or regulate the reproduction of labor' (Kadri 2019: xi). While capital accumulates by war, war itself becomes a sphere of capital production through the making of weapons and the financial spin-offs, the techno-development and the very act of killing lives. The erosion of social labour and the degradation of the biological bases reproducing humanity are systemic processes through which capital reduces the share of value from the social product obtained by labour and undermines its ability to struggle. War and militarism as a form of accumulation by waste are, ultimately, a mode of social production and capital circulation (Marx 1867); they weaken the ability of labour to mediate the forces of capital in favour of the working classes and allow the maintenance of an imperial structure of power, led by the US. In this framework, the circuits of imperialist capital are not understood in crudely economic terms – such as through the analysis of the volume of capital inflows (such as foreign direct investment, bank loans and portfolio investments) and outflows (profit and interest payments) (Veltmeyer 2019). Value circuits in 'developing' nations manifest in the status of national security, thus their political autonomy over economic policies, and living conditions (Kadri 2019). In other words, imperialism is fundamentally a matter of class and state power and as such an issue of politics and political economy (Lenin 1916; Lauesen 2018). This article proposes a novel historicisation of the political economy that subsequently prompted political conflict in the country, bringing back into the analysis the question of US-led imperialism. The article shows how US-led imperialism underlies the ongoing war and militarism, which have sustained accumulation by waste and have contributed to the gradual destruction of Libya. By doing so, it departs from explaining the 'war economy' in Libya and instead focuses on examining the war *and* the economy, linking Libya's trajectory to geopolitical and geo-economic forces at the core of US-led imperialism.

Al-Fatḥ: a progressive and anti-imperialist revolution

> Tell President Nasser we made this revolution for him. He can take everything of ours and add it to the rest of the Arab world's resources to be used for the battle [against Israel, and for Arab unity]. (Qaddafi in Vandewalle 2006, 79)

> Jamahirisation means that all Libyans must exchange their roles. Soldiers become workers, workers become soldiers, students become state-employees, and state-employees become workers. Thus, if the military life is difficult, all of us know it […] and if the administrative life is comfortable, we all experience it. (Qaddafi in Burgat 1985, 601)

On 1 September 1969, a group of 70 graduates from the armed forces' officers' school overthrew King Idris through a *coup d'état*. This bloodless military operation, whose code-name was 'Jerusalem' in honour of the Palestinian cause, responded to a set of economic, social and political contradictions that the monarchy had not been able to overcome. Since its takeover, the political goals of the al-Fatḥ Revolution were to align with the anti-colonial, anti-Western and pan-Arab values that had characterised Nasser's Egypt (Lahwej 1998). The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) remodelled the Libyan political system into the unique party formula of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), and signed a union declaration with Egypt, adopting its flag and anthem (El-Kikhia 1997, 42). Subsequently, the RCC expelled the Italian nationals and Jews, confiscating all their assets, and shut down the Western military bases in the country (*Ibid.*). With the 'Tripoli Agreements', the newly established government completely renegotiated the oil contracts with major Western companies, tipping the balance of power in favour of Libya and, more generally, of oil-producing countries (Parra 2004; Waddams 1980; Yergin 1991). The Libyan government pursued a policy of production cuts and increases in oil prices, encouraging other oil-producing countries not only to renegotiate their agreements with foreign companies (Blair 1978) but also to turn oil into a political weapon. Libya pioneered the political use of oil revenues in the pursuit of revolutionary goals in terms of foreign policy, such as pressuring Western countries over the liberation of Palestine (Stork 1975) and providing financial and military assistance to liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique and South Africa (Otayek 1981). The oil embargo was a cathartic moment for developing countries since it built on – and further boosted – the rapidly growing awareness of the need for joint action to protect economic independence and reclaim permanent sovereignty over natural resources, which resulted in the call for a New International Economic Order (Hope 1983).

From an economic perspective, the RCC unambiguously initiated an independent domestic path to economic development, based on the rejection of foreign domination and aiming at overcoming the economic obstacles inherited from the earlier monarchical rule. In 1973, the RCC nationalised the oil industry; in 1977, it established the *al-Jamāhīrīyah*, introducing economic measures to improve the lives of the most marginalised social groups. The *al-Jamāhīrīyah* built upon the previously launched programme of the 1973 Cultural Revolution, which had triggered the political and economic transformation of Libyan society in line with the directives outlined in the Third Universal Theory, also known as *The green book*. Consisting of three pamphlets, *The green book* was published as a whole in 1981 and aimed to offer a solution to the political, economic and social problems of democracy. Its central tenet was the theory of direct democracy, proposing that 'ordinary citizens can directly manage their lives and devise their own solution to economic and social problems' (Vandewalle 2006, 102) through a dual and complementary

process. In this regard, direct democracy entailed the renunciation of any form of representation or delegation of the people's authority, jointly with the imperative for permanent, popular self-organising at every level of society (Al Gathafi 2005).

Although the ideological ferment played a major role in guiding the political experimentation of the Libyan leadership, the concomitant rise of oil prices and its revenues, which had been pushed by the US as a strategy to counter the international power of Europe and Japan (Oppenheim 1976), also contributed. Oil revenues had quadrupled between 1973 and 1974, and in 1979 the rise in domestic production and the concomitant Iranian revolution increased Libya's annual income to a record $71 billion (Villa 2012). The oil boom of the second half of the 1970s allowed the Libyan government to undertake many bold reforms, such as the elimination of private property and employment, the introduction of a programme of land reform in 1978 (Abdussalam 1985) and caps on real-estate property ownership, limited to one house per person (*al-bayt li sakhini* policy), which abolished the practice of rent (Deeb 1986). In 1986, private land ownership was abolished, and private retailers were forced to close throughout the country; state supermarkets took over the function of providing and supplying food and basic goods. The revolutionary government pursued the return of the ownership of production to the people by replacing the concept of 'wage-earners' with 'partners' (Al Gathafi 2005, 33). At the ideological level, archival sources indicate that the intellectual production of the time, associated with the ideas outlined in *The green book*, saw the liberation of the workers as a crucial step in the realisation of the Libyan revolution (CSLV 1984). The emphasis was on how workers had to become aware of the obstacles faced in the fight against exploitation and the 'legal codification of free work' – meaning wages – which was only a licence provided to capitalists to rob workers of their productivity (CSLV 1984, 194).

Most academic analyses of the *al-Jamāhīrīyah* did not seriously engage with the theoretical and intellectual work that characterised those revolutionary years, opting for simplistic and often derogatory explanations of the failings of the implementation of the revolutionary years' reforms. Very often, scholarship equates the transformation of Libyan society alongside the theoretical principles of *The green book* to the often bizarre and idiosyncratic ideas of the Libyan leader, Mu'ammar Qaddafi, ultimately pursued at his own will and desire. The takeover of the factories by the workers, however, was fully planned at the practical and ideological level. During the factory takeovers, people 'knew exactly where to go [because] it had been prepared down to the last detail' (Naur 1986, 94–96). The workers' takeover was crucial to the subsequent creation of the Revolutionary Committees. By December 1978, workers had taken over 180 industrial and commercial firms, putting into practice the ideological dictum of becoming 'partners, not wage laborers' (Deeb 1986, 451). The creation of popular committees ushered in a new system of democratic representation.

By the mid 1980s, these same manoeuvres boosted national economic development and raised the general standard of living of the Libyan population. The rate of infant mortality was drastically reduced, the average intake of calories per day was the highest among the members of the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (Naur 1986), and over the course of 11 years, life expectancy increased from 55 to 64 years old (World Bank DataBank n.d.). By that point, the government had fulfilled many of its promises: it had transformed slums and unhealthy dwellings into modern tenements (Otman and

Karlberg 2007, 112); it had built a wide range of infrastructure and construction projects, among which were an artificial river and a wide transport and communication network; and it had provided free health care and education. An extensive programme of subsidies organised the provisioning of basic foodstuffs (FAO 2011; Sehib 2013, 22–25). The National Supply Corporation (NASCo), a nationwide organisation created in 1971, managed the import of basic goods, protecting consumers from international price fluctuations and minimising the burden of inflation (Otman and Karlberg 2007, 143). Running against the widespread anti-Libyan historiography (Ajl 2018), these policies translated into a solid popular consensus and widespread support for a model of political and economic development that challenged the idea of a state-centric and market-oriented world political system.

At the political level, the subservience of economic policies to the achievement of anti-imperialist goals translated into the active support of the Libyan government for a wide range of revolutionary, socialist and independent movements across the world, as well as the pursuit of Arab unity, support for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of regional alliances with neighbouring states (Lahwej 1998). Even though their ideological motivations and ultimate political ambitions varied, all those movements were seen as a direct challenge to the hegemony of the main Western imperialist powers (USA, France and UK),[2] and their proxy allies (mainly Israel and Saudi Arabia). To eschew methodological nationalism, a historical materialist approach debunks the state-centric tropes of statelessness and rentierism, which have long been used by mainstream historiography to describe the Libyan social formation while ignoring the broader political ambitions of the Libyan government and reinforcing the US imperialist agenda. On the one hand, the idea of statelessness ushers in the image of a 'rogue' and 'anarchic' state supporting international terrorism. As a CIA declassified memorandum from the 1980s perfectly captures, for Qaddafi anti-imperialist struggle meant 'providing military and financial aid to radical regimes', since his commitment of political, economic, and military resources focused on 'undermining US and other Western interests in Third World as he sees these as the main barrier to his radical and expansionist goals' (CIA 2011, 1). On the other, a state-centric approach obscures how – despite its statelessness – the Libyan government provided support to other revolutionary movements, and particularly to the Palestinian cause, for them to build a state or achieve liberation. If we acknowledge the political valence of anti-imperialist and socialist ideas to the practices of the Libyan government since the early years of al-Fatḥ, it becomes easier to identify a guiding rationale that not only defies imperialist-aligned conceptual tropes but is also in alignment with many other revolutionary and Third World movements (Ahlman 2010; Sajed 2019). For the Libyan revolutionaries, the process of national liberation could only take place within a wider restructuring of the process of unequal exchange and the power hierarchies it cemented allowing the dominance of the US-led imperialist order (Valiani 2012; Smith 2016; Lauesen 2018).

As Adom Getachew aptly remarks, post-colonial 'nationalism in the age of decolonisation continued to confront the legacies of imperial hierarchy with a demand for the radical reconstitution of the international order' (Getachew 2019, 5). From this perspective, national independence was a revolutionary project that required a radical change of the relations of domination in the international order. The Libyan revolutionary regime began pursuing projects of political, economic and monetary integration at the regional

level, believing in the necessity to overcome unequal integration in the world market, and the international hierarchy that facilitated the domination of the global South by US-led imperialism. Strategies of regional integration did not derive from the rejection of nationalism; rather, they were conceived of as integral to the securing of national independence. The nationalisation of the oil industry in Libya or Algeria (Dietrich 2017), similar to the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal (Jabri 2012), represented a paradigmatic moment in post-colonial resistance. The political ambition of Third World countries was to reclaim full sovereignty and control over national resources as a right to self-determination, which had been ratified by the UN General Assembly Resolution 1803 (XVII) in 1962 (UN General Assembly 1962; Ng'ambi 2015). This move also became an important piece that led to the official call for a New International Economic Order in 1974 (see Dietrich 2017).

This process of egalitarian development was gradually abandoned in the 1990s. The structure of the dominant class started to change, the effectiveness of the newly democratic structures decreased and this affected the entire political edifice of *al-Jamāhīrīyah*, leading to the dramatic increase of socio-economic inequalities. Since the early 1980s, a hybrid war on Libya was unleashed by US-led imperialism (Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research 2019), with significant consequences on the socio-economic and political structures of the country.

Unleashing the hybrid war: compradors, Islamists and socio-economic inequalities

> … our [US] basic objectives with respect to Libya: (a) to end Libya support for terrorism, (b) to inhibit Libya from undermining governments friendly to the U.S., and (c) to influence Libya to stop assassination efforts against U.S. and other officials and Libyan nationals in other countries. In order to achieve these objectives, we are seeking to isolate Qadhafi within the world community and to diminish Libyan capabilities. (CIA 2014 [1982], PDF p. 9/28)

Despite the radical nature of its economic reforms, the Libyan government faced huge challenges, especially to diversify the economy and avoid dependence on oil revenues. Libya did not become a socialist state, as it never allowed the people to assume full control over the means of production. The introduction of the concept of 'authority of the people' increased the centralisation of power in the hands of the state, which was heavily reliant on oil revenues. The state capitalist class, which considerably overlapped with the group of army officers who carried out the 1969 *coup d'état*, took control of the national resources, especially banks and oil. They then proceeded to allocate them through economic reforms in support of global political goals, namely the national and anti-imperialist struggle. The Libyan revolutionary government embraced a model of development that was characterised by 'state-led capitalism' (Matar 2013). Investment policies became instruments used for pursuing the construction of a new state and society by empowering marginalised, poorer classes and social identities (Hertog 2010). Although the 'state capitalist' experience had led to better welfare-enhancing and developmental outcomes, by the end of the 1980s, the *al-Jamāhīrīyah* had failed to develop an economy that could sustain Libya's population beyond the use and extraction of oil rent, thus making the country economically self-sufficient.

The agricultural and industrial sectors had not thrived, and they were largely dependent on foreign labour because nationals traditionally working in the agricultural sector were more attracted by higher-paid, part-time jobs provided by the government (Alawar 1985). Since oil was the main source of revenue for the country, the government assumed a purely distributive role, providing imported goods and public-sector jobs to the population. The revolution had not only failed to transform the working classes into a productive force for the economy: it had also undermined the effectiveness of the democratic structure of representation, through an increasingly centralised power structure, under the firm rule of Qaddafi and his close affiliates, particularly the Revolutionary Committees, which sought to inherit the prerogatives and privileges of the old bourgeois order (Capasso 2013).

In the mid 1980s, international oil prices repeatedly collapsed, triggering a decline of Libyan revenues and negatively affecting budget planning. The government began to rethink its economic model; in 1987, Qaddafi announced the first wave of economic liberalisation (*infitah*), presented at the time as a 'Revolution within the Revolution' (St John 2008; Vandewalle 2006).

These dynamics are certainly important to comprehend the difficulties they posed for Libya's economy to develop into a fully socialist one, as for instance other scholars noted in the case of Egypt under Nasser (Hanieh 2013; Smet 2016; Salem 2020). Salem (2020) argued that Nasserism as a political project not only never fulfilled its promises, but also depended on forms of social violence that continue to haunt Egyptian politics today. While it is legitimate to trace the internal dynamics that added to the difficulties of the Libyan or Egyptian revolutionary projects, these should not be seen as the sole causes of these projects' failures. An exclusive focus on internal dynamics risks overlooking the geopolitical context in which these post-colonial revolutionary projects unfolded and ultimately downplays the importance of the constant threat of war, led by US imperialism, that these countries confronted for decades.

For Libya, as for Egypt, opposing imperialism meant winning back the power to imagine alternative paths to development and regional cooperation, to regain the power to shape one's economy, culture and society. The US-led imperialist forces gradually developed a set of measures to discipline the Libyan regime, destabilising and containing its political ambitions, which challenged Western hegemony in the African and Arab regions. Such attempts date back to the 'Hilton Assignment' in the early 1970s, whereby the British government and its intelligence agency MI6 designed a plan to overthrow the Libyan leader. The UK never implemented its plan, since the US government rejected it after Libya decided not to align with the Soviet Union, and thus did not represent a direct threat any longer (Seale and McConville 1973; Davis 1990, 33–34; Dorril 2002, 735–738). It is in this context that the US and its allies unleashed a hybrid war, based on 'a repertoire of unconventional and conventional means using a range of state and non-state actors that runs across the spectrum of social and political life' (Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research 2019, 2). The hybrid war against Libya aimed at undermining the achievements and ambitions of the Libyan revolution, which was one of the North African models of Arab socialism (Ajl 2018).

While the US began imposing sanctions on Libya as early as 1978 (Hufbauer et al. 2008), conspiracies, gunboat diplomacy, bribes and military bombings were being discussed and operationalised, particularly under the Reagan regime (Little 2013). The

hybrid war against Libya reached a turning point first with the long military confrontation in Chad; and second with the imposition of international sanctions in 1992. Those years saw many other episodes of military escalation – such as the military confrontation between Libya and the US in the Gulf of Sidra or the US bombing of Qaddafi's residence in 1986 (Operation El Dorado Canyon). However, I argue that the Chad war and the 1992 sanctions were two key historical moments because they culminated in a massive military-ideological defeat for the Libyan revolution, whose consequences reverberated across all levels of society. They triggered a very deep change in the political-economic structure of the Libyan regime, caused by the increasing geopolitical uncertainty and the threat of war over the country (Kadri 2019; 2016; 2015).

In 1973, when the Chadian civil war started, Libya entered the conflict in support of the anti-French group, *Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad* (FROLINAT), and occupied the bordering area of the Aouzou Strip in order to claim it back. The regime was guided by a clear anti-colonial agenda, denouncing the treaty between France and the previous monarchical regime and thus rejecting the power relations behind colonial border formation in Libya, as had happened with the Gulf of Sidra (Francioni 1984; Silj 1993). Those claims were connected to the Libyan government's own peculiar experiences of state formation that drew on the heritage of the Senusi Order in Africa (Burgi 2009). In response, Chad soon turned into an ideal location for an international proxy war between Libya and its allies and the imperialist forces and their allies: Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Sudan (Toaldo 2013).[3]

These countries provided military aid and training to their local patron, Hissène Habré, who later came to rule Chad until 1991. They also turned former Libyan soldiers into prisoners of war (Nolutshungu 1996) and used them to create an army of 'Libyan Contras' (HRW 2016), under the US government's clout and approval. Interestingly, Khalifa Haftar – the current general vying to control Libya – belonged to this group. The proactive Western role in Chad also aimed to limit the role of Libya in the region, by supporting the National Front of Salvation for Libya, a splinter group of the Muslim Brotherhood, operating in exile and founded in Sudan in 1981(HRW 2016). The military and ideological defeat in Chad was soon followed by the imposition of international sanctions in 1992 after three years of investigation over the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie (Scotland), which had caused the death of 270 people. Although the initial findings assigned responsibility to a Palestinian group backed up by Syria and Iran (Black and Norton-Taylor 2001), in 1991 the US and UK governments concluded that two Libyan subjects had orchestrated the attack as a response to the 1986 US bombings of Libya.[4]

The Libyan government initially refused all accusations and proposed to establish a 'neutral' international court for the trial of the two Libyan subjects (Rubin 1993). In complete breach of international law, in particular the Montreal Convention of 1971 that granted Libya the right not to extradite the suspects, both the UK and the US instead rejected such a proposal and deemed it a sign of blatant obstructionism. Both countries exerted pressure on the United Nations Security Council, until they obtained the passing of Resolution 748 in 1992. The resolution imposed an air and arms embargo and a ban on the sale of oil equipment; it also called on Libya 'to cease all forms of terrorist action and assistance to terrorist groups' (United Nations Security Council 1992). As Rubin notes, the 'irrational' actions of the Security Council seemed to reflect American

and British political interests rather than the procedures of international law. The sanctions ordered by the Security Council rested upon evidence of Libyan involvement in terrorism that 'has not been made public, has been confused in the public mind with a request for extradition or a surrender of Libyan nationals that has no legal basis, and […] demonstrates an unequal application of law and power' (Rubin 1993, 15). The entire Libyan population remained under international sanctions for more than a decade on the premises of this very problematic trial, which condemned one Libyan individual, Abdel Basset Megrahi, for terrorism.[5]

The military defeat in Chad, coupled with the burden of international sanctions, brought about geopolitical uncertainty and a definitive ideological defeat of the Libyan regime that inevitably affected the inter-temporal preferences of investors (Kadri 2019; 2016). When the Libyan government announced the opening up of the private sector, many members of the security apparatuses (police, intelligence and military) began investing abroad the wealth they had accumulated in the previous decade. This generation of young revolutionaries, who had participated in al-Fatḥ Revolution, accumulated wealth through misuse of public funds. They also appropriated private properties through state power, and pursued marriage-alliances with the families of rich business people, remnants of the old monarchical regime (Ouannes 2009). While the initial launch of egalitarian economic policies imposed strict legal limits on foreign dollarised capital and investments,[6] this wave of liberalisation that followed the military and ideological defeat opened up the gates of investment. Libyan investments started to flow towards Western countries, instead of being invested at the national level. This process of shifting allegiances and the consequent divisions within the state-led capitalist class in Libya strongly resembled what Kadri describes as the emergence of a comprador class in other Arab republics, such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria. The changed geopolitical conditions represented a major ideological defeat for the Libyan regime, which began to lose its autonomy over economic policies. Many members of the state-led capitalist class abandoned their support for anti-imperialist policies and aligned themselves with dollarised financial capital. This marked the emergence of a merchant/comprador class (Kadri 2016; 2015), defined by its necrotrophic relationship to its country and its national resources. The once-nationalist elites enriched themselves through rent and commercial activities, systematically transferring their wealth abroad, instead of investing in national or regional enterprises.[7]

Throughout the 1990s, the government launched a second wave of liberalisation and privatisation, allowing the opening of private commercial banks. This second wave marked a definitive abandonment of the egalitarian economic principles that had characterised the al-Fatḥ Revolution. The international sanctions caused a steady rise in inflation, an underperforming public sector, with a dramatic increase in smuggling and black markets (Abdussalam 2006). The rise of an informal economy affected the quality of infrastructure and services and also forced the working classes to look for secondary jobs beyond the public sector (Niblock 2001). The 1990s witnessed a mushrooming of smuggling routes with neighbouring countries, to sell at higher prices heavily state-subsided goods, such as foodstuffs and industrial goods or equipment, especially tractors and trucks (Burgat 1995). Meanwhile, inflation reached record rates at 42% in 1993, peaking at 50% in 1994 (Haddad 2004).

Throughout this economic collapse, social and economic inequalities became very visible (Parteger 2010; Vandewalle 2009) and led to widespread popular discontent, which also turned into armed popular rebellions, such as the attempted *coup d'état* of the Warfalla tribe in 1993. Those sections of the working class which had been left out of the country's wealth either increasingly aspired to the Western patterns of consumption and values embraced by the compradors, or expressed their dissent by becoming more inclined to support religious-based political groups. It is in this context that, at least from the mid 1990s, the Islamist mobilisation in the eastern part of the country became the most visible axis of confrontation, with the support of Western governments. An important threat witnessed the complicity of two British secret intelligence agencies supporting the Islamist group *al-Jamaa al-Islamiya al-Muqatila* (Libyan Islamic Fighting Force) (Coles 2016), which unsuccessfully challenged the regime throughout the 1990s. This group mainly consisted of the so-called 'Libyan-Afghans', thus Islamist-jihadi fighters who had fled Libya to fight in Afghanistan as mujahedeen, and later also joined al-Qa'ida (Ashour 2012). Those years of international isolation, popular unrest and armed struggle led the Libyan government to tighten up its control and security over the population, such as the violent repression of the Abu Salim prison revolt in 1996 (Zarrugh 2018). During that time, the government also began developing new alliances to maintain power. The most emblematic was the creation of the Popular Social Leadership, established in 1993 to grant a role for 'respected natural leaders' – that is, tribal chiefs. This move sanctioned the merging of formal political structures into informal alliances and, more broadly, resulted in the institutionalisation of personalised politics and patrimonialism (Vandewalle 2016, 105–25).

While tribal affiliations always existed and are part of Libya's social texture, they had thus far never played a key political role until their resurgence in the 1990s. Counter to the current tendency to overemphasise the tribal nature of Libya (Lacher 2016; Wehrey 2018), tribalism only constituted a configuration of power relations (Cherstich 2014) which came to be connected to the larger 'culture of corruption' (al-Werfalli 2011, 82–83) favours and bribes that characterised Libyan society from the 1990s onwards. Corruption became the most crucial element that 'undeniably deepened the crisis of confidence in the political system as a whole', translating into political apathy and alienation (*Ibid.*).

The military and ideological defeat triggered a massive reconfiguration of the class and state structure of the regime, which heightened its internal contradictions. The state-led development experienced in the early years of the revolution was gradually transformed into private, neopatrimonial-led development. In this process, a class of military-turned-merchant emerged, which supported the neoliberal reforms agenda of liberalisation and privatisation. In 2004, when the country came out of its international isolation, its elite was internally divided and dominated by this process of class restructuring. Two groups faced each other: the 'technocrats' or 'reformers', guided by Saif al-Islam and Shukri Ghanem who wanted to turn Libya into a version of Dubai, close to the geopolitical capital of the US; and the 'old guard', representing the closer circle of Qaddafi's affiliates. Despite Qaddafi's steady support for a solid programme of regional cooperation with African countries, his anti-imperialist claims had lost traction among the population and were now seen as a diversion from the urgent problems of economic redistribution, not dissimilarly to Mugabe's Zimbabwe (Phimister and Raftopoulos 2004). The elites' defeatism and their acceptance of the imperialist diktat trickled down to the population

under the guise of increasing inequality, which the government responded to by becoming increasingly repressive and domestically illegitimate.

All Qaddafi's offspring occupied critical positions at the financial, political and military levels, which in turn translated into lucrative contracts and progressive accumulation of wealth, thus economic and political capital. For instance, his eldest son, Muhammad Mu'ammar, was the head of the Libyan Olympic Committee and three national telecommunication companies (Almadar, Telecom, and General Post). Hannibal was the head of the General National Maritime Transport company, specialising in oil exports; Khamis controlled one of the most powerful military brigades in the country, called 'Khamis Brigade'; and Mutassim and Saif al-Islam were considered to be possible heirs to the throne and were heavily involved in the political dynamics of the country, setting up all sorts of organisations, from non-profit organisations to armed battalions (Chorin 2012).

The Panama Papers further revealed that 'insiders' of the regime had embezzled large sums of public funds, originally allocated to build hospitals and public infrastructures, in order to buy luxury properties in England and Scotland (Garside, Pegg, and Mahmood 2016). In 2010, Global Witness (2011) leaked a document proving the poor management by prominent American and European investment funds, ranging from HSBC and Goldman Sachs to UniCredit and France Société Générale, of hundreds of millions of dollars of the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA). While producing low returns, these funds charged millions of dollars in fees (Rohde 2011). While Libyan money entered the circuits of imperial capital, financial regulators had no interests in investigating whether the banks that held LIA funds were diverting state funds for the Qaddafi family's private benefit.

In 2003, when Qaddafi decided to publicly announce that Libya was abandoning its Weapons of Mass Destruction programme (BBC News n.d.; Zoubir 2002) in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, the US soon followed other European states in dropping all the economic sanctions. This rapprochement not only led to the reactivation of diplomatic and economic ties; the two countries also achieved significant results at the level of counterterrorism, cooperating on the US extra-rendition programme (Amnesty International 2006). While the corrupt practices of dividing the spoils of public wealth were institutionalised, unemployment reached levels of 20–25% in the 2000s (St John 2008). Like many other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), growing societal discontent over the socio-economic conditions, corruption and police violence acted as potent fuel for the protests that took place in 2011, while simultaneously reflecting intra-elite divisions (Capasso 2018). What brought forth a confused moment of possibility (Capasso and Cherstich 2014) was quickly hijacked by the subsequent scramble that imperialist powers and their regional allies devised. In complete contravention of UNSC Resolution 1973 – forbidding the presence of foreign troops on the ground – many countries quickly began to provide military and logistical support in the form of weapons and training to the different groups of rebels united only by their desire to oust Qaddafi from power. Neither Western (France, Italy, the UK and the US) or Arab Gulf (United Arab Emirates [UAE] and Qatar), nor African states (Sudan) hesitated to send troops to help these very heterogeneous groups of self-appointed and globally supported rebels (Capasso et al. 2019, 8). Framed as a 'humanitarian' mission aimed at saving Libyans, while liberating them from the authoritarian yoke, the NATO-led military intervention overstepped the UN 'no-fly zone' mandate, becoming a regime-change operation. The UN, NATO and its

regional allies mobilised to devise the plunder of Libya, changing its terms and modes of integration into the global economy, via war and destruction.

Libya as an outpost of a global class war

The use of force is integral to the process of accumulation of capital, seen as a historical process. Force is employed as a permanent weapon, not only at the historical genesis of capital accumulation, but rather as its permanent feature (Luxemburg 1913). Once we establish that there is a connection between war and the global production structure, the locus of internationalist class struggle should shift to war zones whose value is being stripped away and destroyed (Kadri 2016). The Libyan case is particularly poignant here, as Libya has become the outpost of a global class war, mirroring the intensification of class struggle at the global level (Abdel-Malek 1977).

In the aftermath of 2011, the literature focusing on war economies in Libya has pointed out how these same formations and elites, which had been smartly played and co-opted by the Libyan government pre-2011, began competing to shape the state following the collapse of the former's monopoly on violence (Eaton 2018). Pack argued that while the opponents of the regime aimed to replace corrupt leaders, they failed to grasp the 'ruse' of this system (Pack 2019a), because the very structure of those institutions was marked by inefficiency and corruption. A recurring argument has it that the initial economic reforms undertaken by the Libyan government created a textbook 'rentier economy' unleashing 'profound grievances, administrative chaos and economic imbalances that have hampered the reconstruction of Libya since 2011' (Fitzgerald and Megerisi 2015, 2). Based on these analyses, policy recommendations prescribe an umpteenth intervention of an international institution, this time as a financial commission (Pack 2020; 2019a) to take over Libya's corrupt and dysfunctional economy, thus finally allowing the country and its people to benefit from the process of globalisation. In this context, the NATO intervention is seen either as a 'necessary evil' or a military operation that took place too quickly and with little knowledge of local dynamics (Weighill and Gaub 2018).

As the article aimed to demonstrate, the dominant accounts of Libya's 'war economy' end up trivialising its history, simplifying it into a history of failure of the periphery to embrace liberal ideas, thus showing the degree of desensitisation to war and militarism that lies at the core of liberalism (Amin 2006). The al-Fatḥ Revolution attempted to undermine the dominant class relations and the forms of state power that had come to define Libya's society after the end of the Second World War. In so doing, the objective was to arrive at a radically different configuration, which academic scholarship derogatorily labelled as 'stateless', where 'a bizarre and extravagant leader' could experiment his 'tribal-oriented political whims' due to the presence of oil revenues (Capasso 2014). These analyses not only lack a clear historical understanding of the country's political trajectory, but also deliberately downplay the far-reaching positive consequences of those reforms over the lives of the most marginalised segments of Libyan society. This also applies to the scholarly analyses that equate governmental redistributive programmes to a coercive measure, characterising them as malicious and evil plans that aimed to have an impact on the lives of billions, while paving the way for some of the longest-lived authoritarian regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Albertus, Fenner, and Slater 2018). Such theories define welfare-oriented measures as a coercive aspect of

distribution, as 'a form of forceful compulsion in which a more powerful party credibly threatens severe sanctions against a weaker one should the latter fail to comply with terms imposed by the former' (*Ibid*., 8). This definition could help understand the political nature of the measures taken by the US and the international community towards Libya throughout three decades. Therefore, they are problematic because their theoretical underpinning is an attempt to align academic scholarship with the hegemonic pretensions of the US government and its imperialist, white supremacist ordering of the world (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014; Bilgin and Morton 2016).

This article does not deny in the least that Libya became a comprador state; rather, it argues that it did so as a result of the constant threat of war, geopolitical uncertainty and the struggle against imperialism. The semi-independent nature of the economic institution to which analysts refer, when explaining the current 'war economy', does not take into account the gradual unmaking of Libya that US-led imperialist forces had aimed to achieve since at least 1973. For these reasons, it is very problematic to claim that 'the idea that Western powers intervened in Libya because they wanted to topple a regime hostile to their interests is simply preposterous' (Achcar 2013, 199). Preposterous is the way in which academic analyses have watered down and trivialised the anti-imperialist goals and ambitions of the Libyan revolution, and its struggle vis-à-vis US-led imperialism, showing desensitisation to the function of war. By doing so, they contribute to framing the periphery of the world, including Libya, as a site of study for reflecting on the failures of Western 'good intentions', of humanitarian interventions and state-building (Hehir and Murray 2013; Kuperman 2013).

The 2011 NATO-led military intervention is the culmination of a long hybrid war unleashed on Libya, which relied on the progressive use of gunboat diplomacy, military bombings, international sanctions and arbitrary use of international law. Borrowing the concept from Ali Kadri, I argue that the NATO-led military intervention was a 'war of encroachment'. The importance of this concept lies in explaining how the current level of destruction, authoritarian control and – most importantly – economic under-development that characterises the Arab region is not the result of 'late-developer syndrome', but is instead the result of wars that function as a domain of accumulation, a sphere of production and simultaneously, as a manifestation of the class struggle (Kadri 2019). These are US-led wars that, while stripping nations of their autonomy and resources are fundamental to sustain imperialist power and imperialist rents (Kadri 2016). More importantly, these wars are undertaken not only to strip national states of their autonomy over economic policy, but also to disempower the working classes and destroy the national unity of these countries.

Libya has witnessed the gradual transformation of the class structure of the regime during its struggle against US imperialism. Even though the country appears divided into two main political factions (Government of National Accord and LNA), these very heterogeneous political coalitions rely on similar economic practices in order to maintain their power and stability. The political economy of those coalitions suggests that political actors in Libya all act as both compradors and warlords. They are not simply militias, because they are able to control an area and exploit its resources while at the same time relying on the crucial support offered by their external patrons. The predatory economic behaviour of these armed groups does not simply reflect the 'legacy of Qaddafi'; it is the

result of a prolonged, politically engineered assault on Libya that has changed the terms of Libya's integration into the global economy.

Even though international actors keep calling for an arms embargo, the destruction of Libya reveals many elements that constitute the current cycle of imperial violence and profitability. First, there is the continuing flow of weapons (from European and other countries) to the UAE (PAX 2017; Wintour 2019) or other regional players, such as Egypt, eventually diverted to their local proxies in Libya (UN 2019). Germany, for instance, has approved arms exports worth €331 million to countries accused of supporting warring parties in the country (Deutsche Welle 2020). Similarly, Italy has sold weapons to Egypt worth a total of €872 million (Rete Italiana per il Disarmo 2020). Second, Libya – together with its neighbouring countries, Niger and Tunisia – has been gradually integrated into an infrastructure of surveillance and border control (Akkerman 2016) via the creation of the border between Libya and Tunisia undertaken jointly by Germany and the US, French military operations in the Sahel, AFRICOM military bases (Turse 2019) or the new EU digital surveillance installation on the coast of Tunisia, 'ISMariS' (Monroy 2020).

Finally, the premise of accumulation by waste also entails the overall weakening and fragmentation of the African and Arab political position, and the cheapening and/or direct annihilation of human lives in Third World countries, as the fate of African migrants perfectly reveals by either dying at sea or being held up as a reserve army of labour (Pradella and Taghdisi Rad 2017). All these manoeuvres do not simply tell us a story of how Libya has turned into a proxy war: they force us to rethink the function of war as a tool of accumulation by waste, highlighting how war enters in the circuits of capital and how crucial is the political struggle against US-led imperialism for progressive forces worldwide.[8]

To conclude, the increasing reliance on war and militarism by US-led imperialist forces is indicative of the progressive decline of the power of Europe and the US at the geopolitical level. One could ask why the so-called 'international community' did not allow the reformist wing of the ruling elites to transition Libya into a full market economy, rather than having the country slip into total war. While I agree with Kadri's insights that wars of encroachment respond to a process of accumulation/dispossession by waste, which could unleash an apocalyptic scenario, I further argue that these wars are also the result of global contradictions and, particularly, the continuing decline of US imperialist power. Since the US invasion of Iraq, the Middle East has been the protagonist of a passage from an equilibrium between economic and military imperialism, where the ideology of economic 'globalisation' had the upper hand, to a militaristic and technological form of imperialist expansion, where total war and pauperisation are pursued (Halper 2015), as in Libya and Syria. This has resulted from the progressive decline of American hegemony in the world due to the worsening of its economy at home, which – in turn – have led to the pursuit and acceptance of 'unfinished wars', particularly in the MENA region. These wars are tolerated because they strike a new balance, and they maintain high levels of international competition, allowing many countries to participate while not necessarily dominating, as is happening in Libya (Petras 2019). Wars and their consequences are becoming the new terrain of social reproduction for imperial capital, a paradigmatic form of investment opportunity through which the Third World is being framed and integrated into the global economy, where armaments, drones and technological infrastructures of surveillance can be tested, perfected and reused at home. In such a

scenario, violence and destruction are the domain of capital accumulation and economic investment for the US-linked global financial class, yet they inevitably reveal a much more violent global class war. The war in Libya is indicative of the merging expansion of security and development (Duffield 2007), which has created a new type of war that is presented as 'surging from a developmental malaise from which comes no clear threat but an ever-present danger' (Charbonneau 2016, 87).

The fragmentation of Libya epitomises the further consolidation of war as a mode of imperial governance through which the post-colonial space enters the circuits of capital. Understanding the fate of Libya is crucial to map out the intensifying configuration of circuits of war and capital, as Libya's fate mirrors the fate of US-led imperialism, and needs to be understood if we are to chart a different way to imagine, fight and prepare for the future.

Notes

1. For a well-argued and comprehensive overview of the (mis)uses of the world 'globalisation', see Veltmeyer (2019).
2. Libya was accused of supporting numerous so-called 'terrorist' organisations worldwide (Jureńczyk 2018).
3. In 1982, the US intentionally relied on Saudi Arabian financing to bribe several African countries in order to deprive Qaddafi of the OAU chairmanship (Lahwej 1998).
4. Following this decision, France also reached the same conclusion over the explosion of another flight (UTA 772 DC) in the skies over Niger in September 1989, condemning another six Libyan subjects. Allegedly, Libya had targeted a French flight in response to France's support of Chadian forces against the Libyan Army.
5. Many analysts (Peirce 2009; Ashton 2013), scholars (Bannon 2020) and UN mission observers (Kochler 2003; 2002) have questioned the trial procedures and the validity of the emerging evidence that allowed the conviction of Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi in 2001 and thus Libya as the sole culprit. Bannon (2020) questions two fundamental points of the trial: the fragmentary and discordant statements coming from the main testimony, a Maltese shopkeeper named Tony Gauci; and the failure of British lawyers to counter them. This critique resonated with the report of Professor Hans Kochler, UN-appointed Human Rights Observer at the trial, who questioned the 'consistency and legal credibility' of the Court's verdict (Kochler 2003; 2002). Recent press coverage (Mohdin 2020) has confirmed that the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission has approved the request, filed by the victims' families, to review the trial's verdict.
6. Libya had a law capping the amount of foreign investment to US$50 million, which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pressured to remove in order to 'modernise the country' (IMF 2006, 3).
7. Throughout the 2000s, Libya partly kept investing in the pursuit of regional collaboration with African countries, but that topic is beyond the scope of this article (see Forte 2012).
8. For instance, Alessandrini (2011) discusses the failure of the Western Left to formulate a unified response to the Libyan events in 2011 and its tendency to consider the Libyan protests only when the international military intervention was being debated. This important criticism falls short of highlighting the role of this same academic scholarship (Halliday 2011; Dabashi 2012; Achcar 2013) by staying silent on the progressive role of war and militarism in the US-led imperialist structure and thus how it contributed in rewriting the history of Libya according to US interests.

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