



Imperialist terrorism in Northern Africa

Matteo Capasso^{1*}  and Essam Abdelrasul Bubaker Elkorghi² 

¹Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, University of Venice, Italy

²Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

This article posits that US-led imperialism remains the most fundamental contradiction to be assessed when analysing the material, social and political development of countries in Northern Africa. After grounding its conceptual discussion around the Marxian analytical character of imperialism, the article focuses on the military–financial nexus and then assesses the ideological implications of this. It argues that imperialism operates according to rational and interlinked strategies that deploy the systematic use of violence and intimidation that are central to undermining the political and developmental potential of Northern Africa. The discussion shows how imperialist policies curb the space of national autonomy required to advance a developmental path in the interests of popular classes and regional solidarity, at both the material and ideological levels.

KEYWORDS

Imperialism; terrorism; ideological assault; Northern Africa; social waste

Introduction

Faced with the evidence of European exploitation of Africa, many bourgeois writers would concede at least partially that colonialism was a system which functioned well in the interests of the metropolises. However, they would then urge that another issue to be resolved is how much Europeans did for Africans, and that it is necessary to draw up a balance sheet of colonialism. On that balance sheet, they place both the credits and the debits, and quite often conclude that the good outweighed the bad. That particular conclusion can quite easily be challenged, but attention should also be drawn to the fact that the process of reasoning is itself misleading. The reasoning has some sentimental persuasiveness. It appeals to the common sentiment that ‘after all there must be two skies to a thing’. The argument suggests that, on the one hand, there was exploitation and oppression, but, on the other hand, colonial governments did much for the benefit of Africans and they developed Africa. It is our contention that this is completely false. Colonialism had only one hand – it was a one-armed bandit. (Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 1974, 246)

*Corresponding author email: matteo.capasso@unive.it

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When Walter Rodney penned his majestic work on *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974), his goal was to trace a clear picture of the devastating effects of European colonialism on the course of African development (Zeilig, Chukwudinma and Radley 2024). Despite countries of Northern Africa gaining independence from the old European colonial empires more than 80 years ago, they largely remain locked in a position of material and ideological subordination to Western interests. As British colonialism faded away, a fourth cycle of Western-led accumulation (Arrighi 2010) had already begun, under the hegemonic control of the triad (Amin 2013) – the USA, Europe and Japan – that we refer to here as US-led imperialism. In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was the USA that consolidated its political and financial leverage worldwide, becoming the major imperialist power. As a creditor to France and Britain during the war, the USA attempted to restructure the world system in the wake of the deficit-driven withdrawals of European colonialism from Africa and Asia. This task required reliance on the interrelated realms of trade and military expansion. As such, the poignant analysis that Rodney developed continues to resonate, yet it must also be updated.

When speaking about imperialism, we approach it as a well-developed category of analysis anchored in Marxian philosophy, referring to a world system of surplus value extraction (Emmanuel 1972; Amin 1976; Patnaik and Patnaik 2017) where development is apportioned unequally along racial and class lines. It is a set of material relations of exploitation between countries of the global North and South, and an encompassing framework of control in which everything – human and non – must prove its productive function in relation to capital, unless destined to perish if it fails to do so (Meszaros 2000). More importantly, imperialism operates according to rational and interlinked strategies that, as we argue, are tantamount to a systematic use of violence and intimidation for the achievement of political objectives. That is, imperialism exercises terrorism, which is central to undermine the political and developmental potential of the global South of the world (or the periphery).

Egyptian Marxist thinker Samir Amin (1976) argued that under the imperialist mode of production an unequal transfer of value exists, where value and profit are extracted from the periphery to the core in the form of cheap labour and natural resources. Peripheral countries, therefore, do not simply represent new markets for the manufactured goods of the core; rather, their seemingly developmental failures embody the structural and necessary conditions for capitalist accumulation to continue. The developmental model of the periphery is predicated on the political and economic exigencies of the global North. It is export-oriented and, most importantly, prevented from accessing technological resources or harnessing their internal resources for the purpose of regional or popular development. The terrorist nature of this process lies in the historically established undermining of the national sovereignty and developmental autonomy of the periphery. This situation is replicated at the monetary and financial levels, where the ‘terrorism of money’ reigns supreme (Alami 2018). By functioning as a key vector of class struggle at the geopolitical level, Ilias Alami argues that money-capital flows mediate international trade and financial transactions. Through balance of payments, exchange rate regimes and funding conditions, this flow ultimately determines the degree of exploitation and domination of the periphery of the world. It generates and follows the necessary conditions for capital accumulation, both mobilising and exacerbating an unequal geography of development between the North and South in the global capitalist system. This explains why loans

from international financial institutions or foreign investments are given to peripheral states with conditions that facilitate the privatisation of public assets or the exploitation of labour. Similarly, the degree of control that imperialist actors possess over the financial system allows them to decide whether to impose an embargo or freeze economic assets, if a country fails to abide by imperialist diktats. To wish for a degree of national autonomy over economic policy can often turn into a call for economic warfare (Capasso 2023a).

The financial dimension of imperialism should not be approached without considering its military aspects, and vice versa. As posited so far, the social reproduction of imperialism occurs through the consumption of the developing world; that is, profits for capital have always depended on economising the living conditions of workers, and therefore nature. As Ali Kadri (2023) points out, the political economy of dollarised financial imperialism is predicated on a specific logic of waste, which annihilates the lives of the working masses of the global South at higher rates, as per the requisites of financialisation. This process takes place protractedly and cumulatively through financial and monetary means – austerity policies and environmental pollution. However, wars, militarism and repression play a unique role because they respond almost instantaneously – via killing – to the needs of capital. In this historical moment, where US-led imperialism is in retreat (Desai 2022) and a nascent polycentric world order threatens it further (Yeros 2024), there has been an escalation of NATO-led wars and expansion across Northern Africa, since at least the 2011 assault on Libya. This process is indicative of the intensified and merging expansion of militarism and finance (Duffield 2007) that has become a major terrain of social reproduction for imperial capital and a paradigmatic form of unequal development through which the global South is being (re)integrated into the circuits of capital via destruction. For these reasons, we pay careful attention to this expanding development of the *forces of destruction* in Northern Africa and how they contribute, both dangerously and decisively, to the underlying logic of waste that US-led imperialism upholds.

Furthermore, the article approaches imperialism as a sociological phenomenon (Capasso and Kadri 2023) operating as both a material and ideological process to shape the totality of social relations. This historically established unequal relation of dominance entails the mass of ideas sustaining the imperialist mode of consciousness. Imperialism generates and follows historically specific ways of thinking about and organising the world that imbricate and perpetuate the unequal development of the periphery. In this regard, as we show below, liberalism represents a unique ideological apparatus that directs the masses away from socialism, offering instead individual palliatives to structural problems. Hence, to acknowledge the existence of a Western-led historical and cumulative process of capital accumulation, subjugating the masses of the developing world, is a direct challenge to the status quo, often labelled as ‘ideological’ in academia. As Rodney argued, the bourgeoisie will not provide the masses with the tools required to undo their privileges. This explains how neoliberal market-led academia and the ‘racket of think-tanks’ (Diesen 2023) on the so-called ‘Southern Neighbourhood’ of the EU – meaning Northern Africa – have worked relentlessly to convince the local Arab and African masses that cultural backwardness and institutional weaknesses are inherent features of their civilisation. They propose that Africa is magically sitting at the margins of so-called globalisation, unexploited and struggling to catch up due to its own internal backwardness (Wai 2007; Harrison 2010). Institutional weaknesses and fragilities are personified in the figures of crazy and evil dictators that, occasionally, must be removed via the imposition

of sanctions regimes or NATO-led military interventions. In such a context, think tanks do a remarkable job in promoting the adoption of any policies that ultimately do not call into question the underlying structure governing the relationship between the imperialist nations and Arab and African countries. Hence, when any political strategy is being promoted about partial greening the planet (Ajl 2021), recycling or striking imperialist-reared ‘peace’ deals or security-led solutions to migration issues (Ness 2023), these ultimately (and purposely) fail to address the holistic and totalising condition under which the developing world is clobbered: US-led imperialism.

Before delving into a more composite picture of the impact of US-led imperialism on Northern Africa, one final note is needed on the degree of social determination that imperialism has on this part of the world, and the global South at large. One of the major critiques against this Marxian category of analysis is that imperialism is deployed in an overtly deterministic manner, thus leaving no autonomy for socio-political formations of Africa and their working masses. Yet, this is far from reality because imperialism as a conceptual category aims to study the consolidation of a project of class collaboration on a world scale. In so doing, it never falls short in assessing how the expansion and sustainability of imperialism constantly requires agents, functionaries and intermediary traders – *compradors* – from the periphery of the world. When these are either absent or reticent to cooperate, imperialist forces can meddle in the political sphere, as happened in Libya and Syria in 2011, hoping to set up reactionary regimes. For their part, the collaborating classes have the arduous task of making sure that the unequal relation of dominance is kept in place. Hence, they cooperate actively by looking for innovative material and ideological ways to control their own population and sell cheaply the human and natural value of their countries. Their role is fundamental in the development of the forces of imperialist terrorism.

The contention of this article is twofold: first, we posit that US-led imperialism remains the most fundamental contradiction to be assessed, as it continues to restrict the material, social and political development of countries in Northern Africa. Second, we provide an overview of how various aspects of what we call US-led imperialist terrorism are unleashed on the popular classes of Northern Africa countries. The first part focuses on the merging military and financial nexus, while the second assesses the ideological implications of imperialist terrorism. The discussion highlights how imperialist policies curb the space of national autonomy required to advance a developmental path for popular classes and regional solidarity at the material and ideological levels.

Financial and military terror: an intensified nexus

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation decided to launch a military operation in the territories of Ukraine. From that moment on, the slightest attempt to mention the possibility that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) played an unproductive role in the build-up to these events became a complete taboo. Dominant political and media narratives emphasised that any criticism of NATO (eastward expansion, broken promises toward Russia, lack of serious diplomatic efforts, and so on) equalled support for what remains an ‘unprovoked’ war that Russia launched on Ukraine (Diesen 2023). Without entering into the details of the dynamics at play that have unleashed one of the major

armed conflicts in Europe since the Second World War (Dunford 2023), what these events did – for the first time, and in a rather clear manner – was to cast an ambiguous light on the role of NATO within its constituencies and continent. However, what remains a possibility or a doubt for some Europeans represents instead an uncontested material reality for the global South, especially for North African countries. NATO-led interventions and Western military expansion, security arrangements and weapons deals are central dynamics to understand how US-led imperialism has increasingly pushed North African countries into circuits of social waste and financial dependency.

One of the most glaring cases is Libya. After 2011, the NATO-led regime-change war has stripped the country of its national sovereignty and autonomy over economic policy, while disempowering the Libyan working masses (Campbell 2018; Capasso 2020). This military intervention was the result of a Western-engineered and prolonged assault on Libya that changed the terms of the country's integration into the global economy. Libya has fallen into the hands of multiple armed groups backed by foreign patrons, each group vying to compete for the country's resources and political power. Libya no longer has a national security apparatus that acts independently without foreign meddling, while there are more than 20,000 foreign troops occupying different military bases (UN News 2020). Even though the country appears divided into two main political factions (Government of National Unity and Libyan National Army), these very heterogeneous political coalitions rely on similar economic practices to maintain their power and stability. The political economy of these coalitions suggests that political actors in Libya all act as *compradors*, criminals and warlords (Rubinstein 2023). The country's national security has been completely privatised to private military security companies, mostly from US allies in the region (especially Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) (RFI 2024). While Libyan resources – mainly oil revenues – flow out of Libya to acquire the necessary logistics, weaponry and military support for their local patrons to establish control (ACSRT 2021), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has launched persistent calls to cut the country's social services, especially its food and energy subsidies (IMF 2023). In a similar move, while the EU sanctions influential militias (particularly those in charge of the Libyan Coast Guard) that are said to control smuggling and human trafficking economies, they simultaneously provide them with funding and training (Urbina 2021) as part of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) operation, which is meant to control the flow of migrants through the Mediterranean (Capasso 2020; Cross 2024, 491–508). What seemingly appears as a paradox is only the result of an expanding and intensifying financial–military nexus. On the one hand, public resources are increasingly being directed to sustain a mode of social reproduction that perpetuates violence and destruction. On the other, this process generates both a deterioration and securitisation of the living conditions of working masses.

While Libya loses billions of public funds through illicit flows, private embezzlement and international sanctions, the costs of this resource drainage are offset to the Libyan popular classes. For US-led imperialism, the drainage of natural resources lays out the conditions for the premature deaths of people in the global South. The increasing deterioration of key social sectors – education, health, nutrition, electricity, water, sanitation and hygiene services – that took place after 2011 does not simply have the potential for long-term negative repercussions on children's wellbeing and ability to reach their full potential (WFP 2023); it manifested in the devastating Storm Daniel in 2023 that unleashed a flood in Derna, causing the deaths of more than 10,000 people. In 2021, Libya's audit bureau

reported that nearly €2.3 million had previously been appropriated by Libya's Ministry of Water Resources to maintain the dam (Megerisi 2023). While a company had been contracted to do the work, the project was never executed due to a mix of corruption, negligence and institutional chaos that circles back to the NATO-parachuted democracy in 2011.

The integration of the periphery into the imperialist structure, coupled with the terrorisation and immiseration of popular classes, is not a feature unique to Libya. This process lies at the core of imperialist control and can be easily found in neighbouring countries, such as Egypt. Following President Anwar Sadat's normalisation of the Zionist entity¹ in 1979, Egypt has become a beacon of imperialist-sponsored repression. Despite being a country with a high rate of poverty and malnutrition, as well as a low respect for human freedoms, NATO bombs will not appear in the skies of Cairo because the ruling class acts at the behest of imperialist diktats. Similar to how the current wave of military coups in Central and Western Africa are being discussed, mainstream analyses on Egypt tend to identify the country's problem in the long-standing role that the army plays in the political arena. What they fail to consider is the political and ideological orientation that a socio-political formation can have, including the army, and how this sits (or not) with imperialist interests. Before Sadat's capitulation, the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser had launched several military operations in the hope of dismantling the Zionist entity that was considered a primary obstacle to the sovereign development of the Arab region. Abdel Nasser's government had also experimented in a unique form of Arab socialism (Kadri 2016) that aimed at providing for its own people, introducing land reform and food subsidies. It did so by accruing a total external debt – the sums owed to other governments, private multinational banks and multilateral agencies like the World Bank – of just over US\$2 billion by 1965 (Stork 1982). When Sadat came to power, US food and security aid resumed, and the country's external debt increased by an average of 28% per year, reaching – after Hosni Mubarak and Abdel Sisi – the current sum of almost US\$370 billion (Cook 2024). Egypt is an exemplary case that has been subjected to monetary and financial terrorism. As the country progressively relinquished its control over national resources it acquired external loans (debt) in foreign currencies with high interest rates.

Financial terrorism continued with the imposition of several waves of IMF structural adjustment programmes under Mubarak, coupled with the removal of food subsidies (Ayeb and Bush 2019) and the increasing rise of a 'securocratic' state (Abdelrahman 2017). The more the Egyptian state acted as a mediator for the financial and military diktats of US-led imperialism, abandoning its sovereignty and immiserating its popular classes, the more repressive its state apparatus became under the lavish funding of the USA and its European allies (Crowley and Yee 2023). Consequently, every time Western mainstream media alarmingly remind us that Egypt is violating human rights, one should also be reminded that popular repression in the periphery of the world is a natural outcome of the US-led imperialist structure of financial and military terrorism. The loss of national autonomy of Egypt is glaring when compared to its past. During the 1960s, when the Egyptian government exercised full sovereignty over its borders, it closed the Tiran Straits to the Zionist entity. Today, Egypt has not only sold Tiran Island to Saudi Arabia, but it has hardly any control over its borders with the Zionist entity, as the recent genocidal assault over Gaza has proven. Egypt's case encapsulates Lin Biao's remark that 'war brings destruction, sacrifice, but the destruction, sacrifice and suffering is much greater if

no resistance is offered to imperialism as the people become willing slaves' (Biao 1965). Egypt's current rate of poverty, loss of political autonomy and child malnutrition bespeak tragedy incurred in wartime-like conditions (Bush 2023).

The situation hardly looks any different if we are to observe the socio-political conditions on the opposite side of the North African coastline, in Morocco. In February 2024, while visiting Rabat, US Marine Corps General Michael Langley, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) Commander, affirmed that Morocco stands as a 'beacon of security and cooperation in the region' (Kingdom of Morocco 2024). Another major African country that accepted normalising its ties with the Zionist entity, Morocco has recently hosted the largest AFRICOM military exercise in Africa, African Lion, and has long been a strategic cog in Africa for US-led imperialism (Forte 2021). Since 1993, the US has provided US\$1.996 million in conventional weapons destruction programme assistance to Morocco, including US\$1.154 million in the 2022 financial year (US Department of State 2024). Most importantly, the Kingdom has played a leading role in US counter-terrorism efforts, especially the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership – a US government-funded and implemented effort designed to counter violent extremism in the Sahara–Sahel region (Keenan 2013). The expanding military footprint of the USA is indicative of how the ruling class of the periphery is rewarded when it actively collaborates in the development of the forces needed for its own destruction.

In common with any collaborator regime of a peripheral country of the global South, Morocco's public debt consists of 66.9% of the GDP. The unique capacities of the country to reproduce imperialist-led modes of production are further visible in the type of neoliberal programmes and rationales that the government adopted in its so-called poverty alleviation programmes. Several authors (Atia 2022; Beier 2023) argue, for instance, how the 'City Without Slums' initiative, highly praised by UN-Habitat, incarnates the socialisation of precarity. Driven by private-led capitalist speculation, precarity has been transformed as the outcome of individual choices of people, belonging to the proletariat, rather than a structural problem. In other words, while being trumpeted as a political initiative aiming to provide formal housing to those living in shanty towns, the Moroccan government has instead produced new uncertainties and more precarity among its population, removing responsibility from the government and letting (as per IMF-developmental tantrums) the private sector take the initiative. This process is even clearer when looking at the so-called National Initiative for Human Development (NIDH), launched in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Casablanca in 2003 and lavishly supported by the World Bank. Claiming to fight poverty, this ongoing programme that started in 2005 adopted the most liberal approach to poverty, turning it into individual property. Poverty is not defined according to inequality but based on a threshold that is defined as the 'poverty line' or a map. In such a vision, free-marketisation of the economy under US-led geopolitical clout allows the Moroccan government to further strip the popular classes of their capacity to fight and claim collective rights and focus on issues of class struggle. Any form of social activism is ideally reduced to an individual responsibility (Bogaert 2018, 171). The fact that both programmes were heavily funded and praised, respectively by the IMF and the World Bank, is a reminder of the terrorist nature of money or, as Alami (2018, 24) aptly argues, money as capital 'flows into those locations and sectors with better prospects of labour exploitation and domination, thereby both mobilising and exacerbating uneven development'. As the next section shows, these political approaches grounded in an ideological

apparatus that severs individuals from the structures around them have important pragmatic consequences, especially for the capacities of the masses to counter imperialism and their reactionary classes.

Before moving to discuss this important aspect of imperialist terrorism, however, it is important to look at the current condition of Tunisia. As Corinna Mullin (2023) argues, Tunisia has fallen under a paradigm of imperialist economic and security dependency, especially following the 2015 mass shooting in the tourist resort of Sousse. This followed another terrorist attack that had also taken place in 2015 at the Bardo National Museum. Both events provided the perfect ground for a novel imbrication of Tunisia into the global economy. Up until the late 1990s, Tunisia's economic dependency had largely mirrored the hypothesis that Amin had proposed in explaining the developmental conditions of the periphery. That is, dependency revolved around the EU's exploitation of Tunisia's cheap labour and export-oriented activities – meaning tourism and the cheap transfer of natural resources. This process heightened further with the economic liberalisation pursued by the Ben Ali government (1987–2011). Ben Ali's presidency oversaw a further entrenchment of Tunisia's food dependency, since the political lexicon concerning the objectives of agricultural policy changed dramatically from the end of the 1980s (Hibou 2011; Zemni 2017). The integration of Tunisia's agriculture into the global market created a structural food dependency and a general impoverishment of the peasantry, unable to supply its own food security. This shift was based on the reorientation of agricultural, economic and natural resources to the benefit of investment in agribusiness, promoting the interests of those who profited from state investment in irrigation to the detriment of family farming (Ayebe and Bush 2019). Those policies produced large-scale changes, since Tunisian agricultural strategy no longer focused on producing more for those in need but became instead a strategy to produce more to export abroad (Tunisian Observatory of the Economy 2016; Amayed 2020). Much like tourism, economic dependency meant that Tunisia geared its economy in favour of Western appetite for profit, which guaranteed political stability to the *comprador* classes (Capasso 2021).

Since the 2011 NATO-led destruction of neighbouring Libya and the waves of terrorist violence it produced, thanks to the uncontrolled spread of weapons that the West had provided to so-called rebels, security became a new terrain of capital accumulation and extraction. Tunisia has witnessed a deluge of neocolonial security funding and expertise after the Sousse attack. It materialised in concrete waves of lavish US military aid packages, security and intelligence training and sharing, border constructions and US military bases (Mullin 2023; Maryon 2024). This qualitative transformation of US-led imperialism, showing a much stronger intent to subordinate the periphery via wars and militarism, has fundamental implications for the entire African continent. It marks a much more coordinated effort to undermine the forces of social reproduction in countries of the global South, since accumulation is more intensely tied to destruction, repression and violence (Kadri 2023). Tunisia highlights the intensification of a novel wave of dependency, which shifts national security and sovereignty through a direct attempt at increasing social waste via wars.

When Amin elaborated a theoretical model to explain how the periphery could overcome its developmental problems, he provided crucial insights on how the unequal transfer of value to the global North takes place. Amin detailed the exploitation of cheap labour, natural resources, ensuing environmental pollution and the cumulative consequences that

these dynamics have on the social fabric of peripheral countries and masses. To such insights, this section adds how recent years have witnessed an alarming expansion of wars, security investments and repression. Western-funded security, military installations and wars are symptomatic of a systematic attempt to undermine and hijack North African socio-political formations as subjects of history. These processes indicate that while simultaneous modes of exploitation are at play, a space of capital accumulation for the global North is being created that caters to the historically situated requisites of financialisation at a time of the decline of US-led imperialism. The ensuing risks lie in the much more instantaneous clobbering of the popular masses, wasting further and quicker southern societies and people, that the expanding financial–military nexus could trigger, if unleashed.

In a context where US-led imperialism is expanding its military footprint over Northern Africa, the ideological assault on the popular masses of the continent has also played a crucial role. It is stripping the masses of their intellectual and organisational means to provide remedial actions to structural problems.

A pedagogy of imperialism: ideological and liberal terrorism

For decades, imperialism has unleashed an ideological war on Third World socialist and national liberation struggles, discrediting and undermining the model of development that these nations were pursuing. In such a context, economic warfare became a major form of imperialist terrorism, used to undermine the forces of production and the political legitimacy of states that dared to challenge imperialism (Capasso 2023a). This also encouraged the dissatisfaction of the masses with their own governments' developmental path. Sanctions also hindered academic collaboration, prevented scientists, researchers and academics from publishing in esteemed journals, and barred the transfer of technology. The dwindling publications and collaborations between sanctioned countries and established universities has resulted in the growth of opprobrium of these countries from within (Ogbonna 2017; Bezuidenhout et al. 2019; Sahimi 2021; Hwami 2022a,b). As a result, imperialist terrorism unleashed a material and ideological battle on the people of peripheral countries, which often ended up internalising a sense of inferiority towards their nations without understanding the core dynamics of what bourgeois academics call developmental backwardness. The results of this ideological terrorism continue.

Take, for instance, the 2011 demonstrations that took place in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The protestors' demands were framed around the overthrowing of 'statist despots' – the famous slogan of 'the people want to overthrow the regime' garnered much traction in dominant media and academic analysis of the events. By presenting the protests as a struggle between the people and a personified/authoritarian state, the programmatic consequence was that the removal of a ruler would realise revolutionary objectives (Capasso 2023b). However, while Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi fell, the region did not enter the promised horizon of democracy. Many bourgeois academics conveniently reverted to explaining this paradox as the result of long-established authoritarian legacies. It is instead important to step back and look elsewhere, at the nature and language used to formulate these demands. First, like the agenda adopted by the Moroccan government

to fight poverty and slums, the protesters' demands framed structural issues of class and wealth redistribution as a question of individuals' rights. Freedom, democracy and social (not economic) equality were demanded, yet there was no vision on how to achieve them. Such ideological and practical limitations also materialised in how the protests failed to contemplate political questions of regional significance. For instance, for a region where the question of Palestinian liberation and the fight against Zionism is a core tenet for regional autonomy and anti-imperialist struggle, by 2011 solidarity with Palestine had almost completely disappeared from the people's demands. Second, and more importantly, the protesters' demands garnered almost immediate and overwhelming Western support, which inevitably was a double-edged sword. Western countries ended up hijacking these protests and turned them into a recipe for regime change without a vision. For these reasons, dominant academic and media narratives strongly emphasised the role of diaspora communities (Moss 2021), magnifying their voices to legitimise imperial intervention, while silencing those 'native-local' voices that did not cohere fully with the imperialist-liberal agenda.

Some scholars pointed out the non-ideological nature of these demonstrations or, as Asef Bayat (2017) called them, that they were 'post-ideological'. While Bayat's description remains somewhat underdeveloped, since it is not clear what (non)ideology should mean (Rehmann 2013), the argument is useful in discerning how these movements advanced a liberal-reformist approach based on a political horizon striving for individual rights and recognition. Such protests differed fundamentally from demands of students and workers in the 1960s and 1970s, grounded in anti-colonial, Marxist-Leninist, or even pan-Islamist ideologies. The fallacy of such alleged non-ideological posturing by these movements that pride in merely asking for 'dignity, freedom and democracy' is that they failed to articulate how democracy, freedom and dignity were to be expressed within the existing political and economic conditions. The imperialist contradiction remained largely untouched. Such myopia rendered these movements susceptible to be transformed from so-called revolts to colour revolutions, drawn from the masterminds of Yugoslavia's Bulldozer Revolution of 2000 that was orchestrated by the notorious National Endowment of Democracy, which has been replicated in Egypt (Herrera 2014). The people's voices were appropriated because of their lack of ideological rigour and cognitive mapping (Jameson 1999), bringing them closer to a material project that promised the impossible for a peripheral country: bourgeois subjecthood.

Understanding the history of imperialism in the region gives clarity as to why these protests embraced liberal values. After decades of imperialist onslaught in Libya (numerous coup attempts, US bombings of Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986, support of terrorist groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and a massive global propaganda campaign to demonise the country), protestors carried the flags of their former oppressors, namely the British, Americans, French and Italians, while inviting Zionists (Henry Bernard-Levy) and warmongers (Hillary Clinton and John McCain) into the country. They chanted and celebrated their freedom in the centre of Benghazi with a sign that read 'United States of America, you have a new ally in North Africa' (Becker 2011). These invitations for the return of imperialist powers could only translate into the loss of sovereignty and the replacement of 'statist despots' with an empire of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As discussed above, Libya's economy has taken a downturn since the 2011 NATO onslaught, due to sanctions and repeated governments parachuted in by

procedures orchestrated and corruptly approved by the USA (Wintour 2021; Fetouri 2022). As part of a strategy of imperialist terrorism, the Central Bank of Libya weakened the currency by more than 400%, the country's gold reserves diminished by 40% and foreign reserves are frozen due to sanctions (Campbell 2018). This has laid the groundwork for Libya's labour to become a reserve army of labour of imperialism to be exploited through globalised neoliberal outsourcing. Libya's numerous investments across the African continent are being auctioned for the price of breadcrumbs and bought by Moroccan, Emirati and other businessmen from the Zionist entity. What is important to understand here is how social struggles formulated through an ideological apparatus grounded in liberalism produce material conditions that do not ameliorate the developmental path of the periphery. Rather they produce the material conditions that the global North requires to extract further capital, while destroying the social fabric of the country. Hence, the legacy of liberal imperialism in Libya is manifold, and it can be best observed in the day-to-day struggles of the masses for social services and the simultaneous process of brain drain and hijacking of well-educated people who lose their organic connection with the country, in exchange for well-paid international jobs within NGOs.

While the youth sought to transform Libya into a Dubai, now they can only dream of a modicum of sovereignty. Their country is not only occupied by more than 20,000 foreign troops (Capasso 2023c), but also controlled by governments whose national and international policies can be largely categorised as functionaries of imperialism with Islamist characteristics (Elkorghli 2024). As Amin astutely articulated, Libya is witnessing 'imperialism's strategy of substituting a so-called conflict of cultures for the one between imperialist centers and dominated peripheries' (Amin 2007). Tugal (2009) further noted that political Islam has taken a neoliberal turn since the 1980s that aligns it with its Western backers, who seek to keep the masses entangled in cultural battles of what is the *right* Islam, while questions pertaining to the economy become secondary (Samara 1995).

As a result, Libya has been turned into a polyarchichal system where competing elites with ties to transnational capital syphon off surplus and deposit it in Western banks. They do so while leaving the working masses fighting for the wages handed to them by a remnant of the socialist legacy of the country (Robinson 1996). Libyans struggle to earn a living wage given the skyrocketing inflation and lack of industrial policy that make the country vulnerable to the whims of foreign trade and instability of international markets. The goal is then to accumulate whatever hard currency they can hoard, which the NGO empire will gladly offer them. The NGOs, in turn, hire an elite few who are granted visas to traverse European capitals and attend workshops on peace and security, young entrepreneurship, small business and municipality governance. All these activities dissuade the masses from critiquing the true contradictions of imperialism that caused the destruction of the country. The NGOs sustain such relationships to disincentivise a revolt against neoliberal imperialism (Petras 1999), while simultaneously interjecting their operations in the country's institutions. The wealth of ideas and praxis produced by these NGOs and think tanks stifles the politicisation of the masses. It fills a void on the intellectual and practical levels that ultimately fits the imperialist narratives (such as the necessity of sanctions, military interventions and demonisation of the state), since NGOs never challenged the hegemony of US-led imperialism and its endless capitalist expansion (Mwangi and Maghanga 2023).

Given that ideological terrorism in Northern Africa has spanned the latter decades of the twentieth century, the ideological sphere is also witnessing an immense wave of historical

revisionism in the service of imperialist interests. This process is mostly pronounced in the field of education in Libya and across much of Northern Africa. In Libya, school textbooks have been rewritten to remove any traces of socialism and Libya's internationalist policies that sided with Palestinian liberation, anti-apartheid South Africa, Black and Native American people, and Nicaragua's Sandinista movement, to name just a few. Like Iraq's destruction and its impact on its textbooks with the silencing of Baathist history (Saltman 2007), Libya's current textbooks stop at 1969, when the Libyan monarchy was overthrown by the Revolutionary Command Council. They glorify the 400-year Ottoman occupation of Libya as spreading Islam, while condemning the critiques of Ottomanism as heresy – an indication of Libya's current political leadership alignment with Türkiye. As per global history, Soviet contributions to the Second World War are overlooked and only those of Western powers, France, the UK and the USA, are referred to. Libyan students have stopped studying their country's history since 1969, while they know factoids about global history. Strikingly, NGOs have begun providing their democracy promotion directives to the 'new Libya'. The CIA-funded International Foundation for Electoral System (Robinson 1996) authored Libya's civic education textbooks and trained Libyan teachers to perform the needed pedagogy (IFES 2018, 2019). Libyan textbooks are infested with liberal and rights-based narratives that are divorced from Libya's culture, politics and economic reality (Elkorghli 2023a). The education system is thus susceptible to infiltration by NGOs (Petras 1999), which actively promotes an ideological and material vision for Libya that favours imperialist exploitation, actively contributing to the formation of local collaborators and agents.

The way liberalism interjected the public discourse of the periphery is directly connected to the unipolar rise of US-led imperialism, with its financial, military and ideological consolidation. As Francis Fukayama, author of *The End of History*, argued, for a socio-political order to be liberal, a capitalist mode of social reproduction is a fundamental requisite. Hence, liberalism focuses on individual freedoms, because it cannot provide the tools to articulate questions of political economy and politics of redistribution on a global scale. This means, in turn, that all political projects grounded on ideas supporting popular control of the productive forces, sovereignty over national resources and redistribution of wealth cannot develop from within such an ideological apparatus. Rather, they are perceived as antagonistic to a somewhat harmonious globalised world – meaning imperialism – and rushed to be labelled as illiberal, if not outright fascist. For the periphery, the implications stretch even further. Liberalism not only rejects the struggle for national sovereignty as an anachronistic remnant of the past, but it also equates it to its Nazi-fascist history. More importantly, liberal democracy is structurally unachievable for the periphery of the world. As Gabriel Rockhill argues (Rockhill and Dingqi 2023), in the USA, liberal democracy functions like the good cop of capitalism, promising rights and representation to compliant subjects, while fascism (the bad cop) is unleashed on the poor. From a global perspective, when it becomes clear that imperialism operates through a systematic use of violence and intimidation, thus terrorism and fascism, to undermine the political and material development of the periphery, then liberalism fades away entirely as a category.

The ideology of contemporary imperialism as disguised under the emblem of liberal rights is also being promoted across much of the region by think tanks and NGOs of empire (Diesen 2023). In 1998, the Zionist entity founded the Institute for Monitoring

Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) that evaluates the content of textbooks of Arab and Muslim-majority countries based on values of ‘respect, individual other, no hate, no incitement [of violence], peacemaking, unbiased information, gender identity and representation, sexual orientation, and sound prosperity and cooperation’ (IMPACT-se 2023). Following the Abraham Accords that signalled the normalisation of many reactionary regimes (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan), this think tank rushed to evaluate several of these countries’ textbooks and check whether their contents promote peace and coexistence.

In recent years, this institute has glorified the changes in Egyptian textbooks because they do not promote hatred against the Zionist entity and its project, unlike earlier versions (Winter 2023; Pardo and Winter 2024). Hidden behind this liberal, ahistorical language of conviviality is the normalisation of Zionist settler colonialism and genocide against the people of Palestine. The pupils who engage with these textbooks are being subjected to an education that promotes ahistorical liberalism, while greenlighting imperialism (Elkorghli 2023b). This is to be expected when the whole leadership of Egypt invests in privatising the country’s economy and promoting individualism through what has been termed entrepreneurial citizenship education. Like in Morocco, this framing seeks to absolve the Egyptian state from its social and economic obligations towards its citizens (Alaoui and Springborg 2021), turning poverty and misery into an individual problem. Rida Hijazi, the current Minister of Education, recently promulgated liberal individualism by proclaiming that ‘the responsibility of the [Ministry] is to prepare a generation that succeeds in the future ... The age of jobs has ended. To be an employee will not make you successful. We need instead an entrepreneur’ (Group El Mumy’s 2023). Egypt’s rich history on grand regional and global projects of anti-imperialism and national liberation have become obsolete and replaced by a ruling class that abides by the diktats of imperialism.

The Moroccan education system has also changed in recent years to reflect the interstitial geopolitical changes the region has undergone and the normalisation with the Zionist entity. After decades of border disputes with Western Sahara and oppression of the Saharawi people, the USA decided to recognise Morocco’s right over the territory of Western Sahara in return for normalisation with the Zionist entity. The latter has lent intelligence support to stifle Saharawi resistance and imprison opposition activists (Amnesty International 2022). This coincides with a change in tone in their educational textbooks, where the books now double down on claims of territorial integrity over Western Sahara while toning down animosity towards the Zionist entity (Shalev 2023).

These examples explicate how imperialist terror has ideologically assassinated the popular masses of Northern Africa. Revolutionary thinking and anti-imperialist praxis have been replaced by the reactionary regimes imposed and supported across the region. Again, these countries should not be isolated from the rest of Africa, despite how much the US Department of State wishes to divorce the fates of the African people by propagating the racist terminology, sub-Saharan Africa. If the destruction of Libya is any indication of the interconnectedness of African countries, it is the countries of the Sahel that have borne the impact of the massive weaponry provided to Libya’s rebels in 2011, which led to the destabilisation of the Sahel and beyond. The militarised accumulation in NATO’s ‘Southern Neighborhood’ and the expansion of AFRICOM have managed to keep the wealthy African continent obedient to the hegemony of US-led imperialism. Through surveillance via the EU’s Frontex and Irini operations, weapons heading to Libya were stolen

by the coastguard of Libya and donated to an ally of imperialism, Ghana (Ghana Armed Forces 2023). Imperialism balkanises the continent and creates an interlinked hegemonic structure that reproduces the conditions for more capital accumulation and extraction through financial, military, and ideological mechanisms.

The imperialist project in the region is ultimately the same across different countries. Whether it is to bargain Morocco's normalisation for the sake of so-called territorial integrity vis-à-vis Western Sahara (imperialism's double standard on self-determination of minorities – Kosovo and Taiwan as opposed to Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk and Republika Srpska), Egypt's loan approval for its continuing military support to the US project in the region, Tunisia's security dependency, or Libya's NATO destruction and lingering sanctions since 2011, they all produce similar states with varied degrees of political subservience or sovereignty. The project has largely succeeded in turning the state, the only institution that could mediate the interests of the working masses regarding imperialist terrorism, into the hands of collaborator regimes, obedient to the various diktats of US-led imperialism.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted how US-led imperialism represents the most fundamental contradiction to be assessed when analysing the developmental and political difficulties faced by the masses in countries of Northern Africa. US-led imperialism integrates these socio-political formations in the circuits of capital through various forms of ideological, financial and military activities. Most importantly, it has pinpointed how these strategies amount to rational and calculated violence that purposely hijacks their political and developmental autonomy. While Rodney considered colonialism as a one-armed bandit, this article argues that imperialism is terrorism. Through a relentless attack on the institutions required to mediate the interests of the working classes vis-à-vis imperial capital (i.e. the sovereign state), imperialism cheapens the value of labour and resources of the developing world, while undermining its capacity to resist and challenge the imperialist crusade. Financial dependency and military destruction, coupled with the capitulation of the masses to the diktat of liberal ideology, have done all they could to undermine the organisational capacities that challenge imperialist power. While these simultaneous modes of exploitation are at play, a space of capital accumulation for the global North is being created to cater to the historically situated requisites of financialisation at a time of increasing decline of US-led imperialism.

While such an overview might present Northern Africa in a comatose stage, it is fundamental to remember that the region lies between two of the most paradigmatic events of this century: the ongoing national liberation struggle of Palestine that has been reignited after 7 October 2023 (Ajl 2024) and the series of military revolutionary coups that ignited mobilisations in Central and Western Africa (Engels 2023) against Western neocolonialism. The lessons from these revolutionary moments are clear and must not be underestimated. Due to its structural nature, imperialism constantly drives the masses into revolt, because in their daily lives, the imperialist project is geared to oppose and attack their quest for developmental autonomy and sovereignty. The people of Palestine, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad have long carried the yoke of suffering and humiliation that

US-led imperialism has imposed on them, in its Zionist or French variants. Such actions taken to challenge imperialist forces can cumulatively ignite revolutionary potential elsewhere, and the people of Northern Africa are too close not to be touched by the possibility that another world can be imagined and built.

Note

1. The term ‘Zionist entity’ is not a rhetorical or editorial device, it is grounded in Third Worldist understanding of ‘Israel’ as an imperialist-backed, settler-colonial entity implanted in the region (Kanafani 2022; Kadri 2023). The term is used in place of ‘Israel’ and/or ‘state of Israel’ because it aims to capture the temporary nature of this entity, whose overcoming is central to the development of the region.

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Notes on contributors

Matteo Capasso is Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Venice. His research focuses on the impact of US-led imperialism across the modern Middle East and North Africa. He is the Editor of *Middle East Critique* and the author of *Everyday Politics in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya* (Syracuse University Press, 2023) that reconstructs the events leading up to the 2011 NATO-led regime change operation in Libya.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8064-3708>

Essam Abdelrasul Bubaker Elkorghli is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research and work focus on the contemporary history of Libya and its education system, the impact of imperialism on global education, and the undergoing ideological

projects promoted by transnational actors in the Third World. He serves as the Assistant Editor to the *Middle East Critique*.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7075-6714>

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