

The liberal-left are at odds on Libya Brian Whitaker The Guardian 5 May 2011 (...) Military intervention in Libya, like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is dividing public opinion. Many critics see all three as part of the same neo-imperialist project – to install puppet governments and assert western domination over oil supplies.

That certainly seems to be the view of

[Tariq Ali](#)

and many who post in the Guardian's comment threads. A constant refrain is that the conflict in Libya is "all about oil".

But the dividing lines over Libya are not exactly what they were with Iraq. Significant voices that opposed the invasion of Iraq are more equivocal about intervention in Libya or even support it.

Professor Juan Cole, one of the most prominent American critics of the Iraq war – and who still calls it illegal – takes an entirely different line on Libya. At the end of March, [he wrote on his blog](#)

:

"The Libya intervention is legal and was necessary to prevent further massacres and to forestall a threat to democratisation in Tunisia and Egypt, and if it succeeds in getting rid of Qaddafi's murderous regime and allowing Libyans to have a normal life, it will be worth the sacrifices in life and treasure. If NATO needs me, I'm there."

In 2002, Hussein Ibish, of the American task force on Palestine,

[described war in Iraq](#)

as unnecessary, dangerous and completely unjustified. Last week, in contrast, he was

[robustly defending](#)

"Obama's limited engagement in Libya".

In Britain, another opponent of the Iraq war – Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) – says he is "broadly supportive" of military efforts to protect civilians in Libya, though he is "somewhat concerned" about

[mission creep](#)

and the lack of a clear strategy.

Yvonne Ridley – the British journalist who was kidnapped by the Taliban, later converted to Islam and became a critic of the "war on terror" –

[now argues](#)

that the west must give the Libyan rebels "all the help and support they need to accomplish the removal of Gaddafi", adding: "The people of Libya would have been brutally crushed without

mercy if the west had not responded to their cries for help."

These are a few of the more striking examples. But why, exactly, is Libya different?

There were certainly some who made a case for "liberal interventionism" in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it was muddied by numerous other factors and for that reason never became very convincing. (...)

(...) Intervention in Iraq was also widely opposed by the Arab public (as well as some of their leaders) and there were serious legal questions as to whether the UN security council had [actually authorised war](#)

In Libya, the humanitarian aspect was more clear-cut and less complicated by other factors. The Gaddafi regime had made explicit threats against its population and there were reasonable grounds for believing a bloodbath would ensue.

Also, between the outbreak of the conflicts in Iraq and Libya, the UN had adopted the principle of "[responsibility to protect](#)" (supported by various [humanitarian organisations](#)) and, in effect, Libya was the major first test of its effectiveness.

Another difference in the case of Libya is that the balance of Arab opinion favoured intervention and the security council clearly authorised it (by "all necessary means"), even if there are disagreements as to whether that includes targeting the Gaddafi regime.

Unlike the runup to the war in Iraq, the Libyan crisis blew up suddenly – which weakens the idea that intervention was part of some preconceived western strategy (despite many claims to the contrary). Unlike George Bush, Barack Obama was initially reluctant to get involved. (...)

See [full article.](#)