

Re-Imagining IR Through the Anti-Imperialist Archives of the South of the World

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Matteo Capasso¹ 

Abstract

Since the 2000s, recurrent calls have been made to de-provincialize, globalize, and decolonize International Relations. While such increasing awareness within the scholarly community has led to a considerable wealth of knowledge production, the scope and scale of this turn remain nonetheless very debated. Centring an archival methodology, the article contributes to these debates through the insights and praxes of socio-political formations confronting US-led imperialism. The article draws on the case of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and focuses on the internationalist newspaper, *al-Zahaf al-Akhdar* (The Green March). It argues that *Zahaf* is an example of how the anti-imperialist archives foreground an ethos of resistance whose conditions of articulation stem from the pursuit of sovereignty, national liberation and internationalist unity against imperialism. It concludes reflecting on how the materialist analyses that these archives develop force us to re-imagine the contours of IR, at a time of increasing US-led imperialist violence.

Keywords

decolonial IR, anti-imperialist archive, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, imperialist library, global South

Since the late 2000s, the discipline of IR has persistently undergone a process to rethink radically its boundaries of knowledge production—a process whose very nature aligns with the profound crisis of the Western civilization. By acknowledging the Western-centric and deeply colonial nature of the discipline, recurrent calls have been made to de-provincialize, globalize, and decolonize the discipline. While such increasing awareness within the scholarly community has led to a considerable wealth of knowledge production (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Picq, 2013; Shilliam, 2021), the scope and scale of this turn remain nonetheless very contested. The main points of debate not only entail the enduring persistence of Eurocentrism in providing the epistemological

¹School of Country and Region Studies, Institute of Middle East Studies, Northwest University, Xi'an, People's Republic of China

Corresponding Author:

Matteo Capasso, School of Country and Region Studies, Institute of Middle East Studies, Northwest University, Chang'an Campus, Xi'an 710127, People's Republic of China.

Email: capasso@nwu.edu.cn

and ontological coordinates of the discipline; but also questions related to counter-strategies (Hobson & Sajed, 2017; Tucker, 2018). For instance, some scholars have aptly demonstrated that ‘looking beyond the “West” may not always involve discovering something that is radically “different” from one’s own ways of thinking about and doing world politics’ (Bilgin, 2008). Some others have warned how such labels – that is, decolonize, despite their radical ambition to move beyond Western-led epistemological conditions within the academe, ultimately incur the risk to become a ticking-box exercise; that is, to repackage radical ideas in an otherwise neoliberal university (Adebisi, 2020). Overall, a consensus exists towards the need to pluralize the discipline, aiming to ‘recover and engage with marginalized and erased knowledge’ (Tucker, 2018). In this regard, it goes without saying that feminist, indigenous, queer, race and critical theories have helped a lot to advance this arduous and welcoming task within the discipline of IR.

This article grapples with these debates and aims to advance them fruitfully by focusing on the relation between the imperialist library and anti-imperialist archives. While emerging in continuity with centuries of Western colonialism, I argue that the imperialist library also evolves within a definite set of material and epistemological relations anchored to a specific stage of capitalist expansion, the one under the rise of US unipolar domination. Hence, anti-imperialist archives are a space of buried theoretical production, belonging to these Global South socio-political formations that challenged, and thus bore the most the weight of US-led imperialist policies. As such, these archives offer complex analyses on the nature of that worldwide structure of domination, identified as US-led imperialism. Also, they show how such conceptual articulations emerged and followed on the material and political obstacles that Global South countries encountered towards their path to national liberation and sovereign development. Methodologically, the article draws on the case of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (LAJ), zooming into archival texts linked to an internationalist revolutionary newspaper published in the 1980s, titled *al-Zahaf al-Akhdar*¹ (The Green March).

To present this argument, the article’s structure will be divided into two main parts. The first part will discuss the contours of what I define as the imperialist library, and its relation to IR. I will outline how the absence of rigorous academic research on the nature and significance of the intellectual production under LAJ stems from the type of Western-centric ideal-type regime categories (the imperialist library) that the decolonizing turn aims to question. Since these were persistently used to water down the socio-political trajectory of LAJ (Capasso, 2021), there is a need to interrogate them deeply. Such a discussion assumes even more relevance considering the methodological efforts required to recover these anti-imperialist archival texts in the aftermath of the 2011 NATO-led bombing of Libya. The second part will focus on two main interrelated themes that characterize the anti-imperialist archives. It traces how these archives advance an internationalist, South-led struggle for developmental and intellectual autonomy, and national liberation. The conclusion will reflect critically on the afterlives of these archives when situated within and beyond the contours of decolonial IR.

Waste, Imperialism, and the Anti-Imperialist Archives

Discussing the status of Africanist studies, thus the epistemic systems within which academic knowledge on and about Africa is produced, Zubairu Wai (2015, 2024) borrows the metaphor of the ‘colonial library,’ from the work of the African philosopher Valentine Yves-Mudimbe. The colonial library incarnates the discursive frames and systems of representation that over centuries constituted Africa as an object of western imperial vocations and colonial fantasies (Ibid., 270). Building on Wai, while combining the insights from Third World Marxist theorists, I propose a further historical periodization of this library, to which I refer as the imperialist library.

As Samir Amin (2022) argues, Eurocentrism is not simply a trans-historical cultural project; rather the foundation of Western cultural superiority lie in the consolidation of a capitalist mode of

organization within European society, propelling a project of world domination since the 14th century. While the imperialist library emerges in continuity with centuries of Western colonialism, it also takes shape and evolves within a definite set of material and epistemological relations anchored to a specific stage of capitalist expansion, US-led imperialism. By imperialism, I refer to a well-developed category of analysis anchored in Marxian philosophy, describing a world-system of surplus value extraction (Amin, 1976; Patnaik & 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, an encompassing framework of control in which every social aspect, thus texts and archives as well, must prove its productive function in relation to capital, unless destined to perish if it fails to do so (Capasso & Elkorghli, 2024).

More specifically, the political economy of dollarised financial imperialism is predicated on a specific logic of waste. Wasting refers to the annihilation of the lives of the working masses of the global South at higher rates, as per the requisites of financialization (Kadri, 2023). Wasting is a process that takes place protractedly and cumulatively through financial and monetary means, including 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. How is this connected to the question of archives and library? Because imperialism is a sociological phenomenon, operating as both a material and ideological process (Capasso & Kadri, 2023).

As such, imperialist-led wasting operates both materially and intellectually. In Libya, when the 2011 NATO-led bombings of the country began, the government moved most of its archival documentation, including both official and intellectual texts, at the Ouagadougou Conference Center in Sirte. Unsurprisingly, the national archives were targeted² by NATO and its proxy allies in October 2011 (Forte, 2012), despite the non-military nature of the target. Wasting also entails the destruction of the wealth of ideas produced by the Global South, the appropriation of its history and archives. After all, culture has always been a terrain of struggle for the success of foreign domination (Cabral, 1974). On an intellectual level, the imperialist library generates ways of thinking about and organizing the world that perpetuate the unequal development of the global South. That is, it locks countries of the Global South in a condition of intellectual and methodological imperialism (Alatas, 2000).

In the case of LAJ, the kernel of this conceptual subtext, uncritically adopted to frame its socio-political nature, consists of three main regime-type categories, as argued extensively by other scholars (see Capasso, 2021; 2023a). Mixing oil abundance (*rentier*) with authoritarian revolutionary fervour (*authoritarian*) and foreign policy adventurism (*rogue*), mainstream IR scholarship has consistently presented LAJ as a concrete threat to the US-led world order, while simultaneously reducing its intellectual production to the bizarre ideas and figure of one man – Mu'ammarr Qaddafi. Let us succinctly peruse the major problematic aspects. First, reminiscent of Orientalist writings, the concentration of power in one man signals the lack of a normal, democratic, and functioning political order that inevitably leads up to the emergence of deviant forms of authority. The basic proposition of these conceptualizations entails the complete disarticulation of the relationship between state and society. The latter is replaced by a patron-client relationship that the presence – and squandering – of oil revenues (*rentier state*) reinforces, and it is also used to pursue illiberal and rogue foreign policy. The issue at stake here is to acknowledge the constitutive role that such theoretical constructs have in upholding the universal claims to knowledge of IR. That is, the 'healthy' capacity of a Global South state to function is measured vis-à-vis the universal thresholds of Western-based bourgeoisie democracy and liberal globalization. Universality is thus posited on the existence of a core difference between the state-society relationship that unfolds in the modern and democratic West vis-à-vis countries of the Global South, especially those accused of challenging the US-led capitalist order (Manchanda, 2020).

While the imperialist library assumes that other parts of the world develop in the same manner as the modern Western world, it does so to conceal the imperialist violence used to lock the Global South in a condition of unequal development. Hence, the imperialist library relates to this larger and historically situated structure of knowledge, geared to the interests of the ruling class (Ake, 1979). By incarnating the weight of ideas required for the reproduction of US domination, the imperialist library trivializes, if not outrightly wastes, the political and intellectual practices from the South of the world that collectively strive to build an alternative world-ordering vision. This is why the political history of LAJ has been framed through dominant conceptual theories that too often cohered with Western governments political actions used to discipline LAJ, such as the 1986 US bombing of the country, the US unilateral and then UN multilateral sanctions imposed for over two decade (Capasso, 2023b), up to the NATO-led regime change operation in 2011. As a result, no rigorous academic study has ever been undertaken on the nature and significance of the ideological production of LAJ, unless one incurred the risk of being called out as a ‘terrorist’ supporter. Similarly, the overwhelming reduction of LAJ to Qaddafi has literally vaporized the possibility that any serious theoretical vision was actively being articulated in Libya, unless wanting to be called a ‘Qaddafist’. Against the backdrop of what I analysed thus far as the imperialist library, I shall now unravel the significance of its potential antidote: the anti-imperialist archives.

On a conceptual level, the anti-imperialist archives engage with the discursive and analytical categories that many socio-political formations of the South of the world deployed to understand US-led imperialism, while materially aiming to delink. That is, to look for alternative, autonomous and endogenous models of sovereignty and development. On a methodological level, it is a work of historical and intellectual reappropriation, recovery and reconstruction of texts, newspapers, pamphlets and official documents that became the target of imperialist destruction. This meant that archival research had to be undertaken in the countries of the imperialist core, across various national, public and private universities libraries in the US and Europe, including the Library of Congress in DC, Columbia and Stanford university’s libraries, the New York Public Library, the British National Library, to name a few. The methodological necessity to recover, reappropriate and reconstruct LAJ cultural production – lost in Libya yet present in the West – further confirms how the imperialist library manifests itself through infrastructural and epistemic domination. As the very libraries of the imperial core hold onto these archives, knowledge stemming from Global South communities becomes raw material that can be appropriated for academic gains (Cusicanqui, 2012; Meza, 2019).

Yet, these conditions of recovery are themselves a product of the imperialist structure. The collection of 220 issues of *Zahaf* that this article draws on required access to multiple elite Western institutions whose entry is contingent on forms of academic affiliation and mobility that remain inaccessible to most scholars from the Global South. Palestinian, Iraqi, or Libyan researchers seeking to reconstruct their own intellectual history must travel to the imperial metropolises to do so, reproducing a condition of dependency at the very level of knowledge production. The commodification of these materials further compounds the problem. Part of the Turkish-language edition of *Zahaf*, for instance, was acquired through *eBay* – looted or dispersed revolutionary materials entering circuits of capitalist circulation, stripped of their original political context and reduced to collectible artefacts. The research underpinning this article is not exempt from the structures it critiques; its dependence on US and European library infrastructure is itself a manifestation of the epistemic asymmetries that the imperialist library reproduces. This is not a performative gesture of reflexivity but a materialist observation: the conditions of possibility for recovering anti-imperialist archives remain embedded within the very system of domination that sought to destroy them.

The article focuses on one specific newspaper, *Zahaf*, considered the official organ of LAJ Revolutionary Committees, containing and propagating the ideological and intellectual debates defining the Libyan revolutionary march.³ Published in Arabic and, at least, five other foreign languages (English, French, Italian, Spanish and Turkish),⁴ this newspaper was launched in 1978 and had the highest circulation amongst those published in Libya, about 50,000 copies, continuing up until 2011. While in Libya *Zahaf* often fluctuated from weekly to daily publication, its foreign editions remained weekly. The latter were controlled by the People's Bureaus (embassies) that Libya had opened in each foreign country, often in collaboration with local companies. The publication of the foreign version appears to start in 1980 and interrupts in 1984-85, seemingly after the engineered oil gluts of the mid-1980s that impacted the economic resources required for the sustainment of such activities. The analysis draws on a collection of 220 weekly and daily issues of *Zahaf*, limited mainly to the English – and partly Arabic – version, on a period that goes from July 1980 to June 1984.

The Green March Against Imperialism

To understand the significance and nature of *Zahaf*, it is important to historically situate its creation in relation to the political developments and strategies that marked the Libyan struggle for national liberation. Responding to a set of economic, social, and political contradictions that the Western-sponsored monarchy had not been able to overcome, on September 1, 1969, *al-Fāṭih* Revolution occurred. From its takeover, the Libyan post-colonial state pursued, like countless other national movements that had flourished within the historical moment of African and Asian decolonization (Gotachew, 2019), an interrelated and tripartite strategy aiming to consolidate the goal of national liberation: a) broader restructuring of the international power hierarchies that sustained Western imperialism; b) strengthening regional solidarity, strongly grounded in the Pan Arab vision and the liberation of Palestine; c) the construction of a developmental path toward economic sovereignty and national security.

While such strategies were pursued in a less systematic manner during the first years, they consolidated with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1973, and even more so with the creation of the Jamahiriya (Republic of the Masses) in 1977. On an economic level, the oil industry was nationalized, five-years industrial and economic plans were designed, coupled with reforms tackling the elimination of private property and employment, and a programme of land reform (Capasso, 2023b). On a political level, LAJ since 1975 'adopted a policy of subversive activity, coup plotting, and support for 'national liberation movements' in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as support for terrorist organisation in Western Europe' (CIA 1983, 2, 1985). That is, logistical and military support was directly extended to a wide range of revolutionary, socialist, and independent movements across the world (Yordanov, 2023).

As such, these material forms of economic planning and South-South solidarity also translated into numerous cultural and intellectual initiatives that LAJ launched within and beyond the national boundaries. LAJ focused a lot of its resources in spreading the core ideas of *The Green Book*, the ideological treatise containing the most defining principles of the newly envisioned system of representation that al-Jamahiriya aimed to implement, also called direct popular democracy. Consequently, *The Green Book* was translated in several languages and numerous symposia and conferences were organized in and outside Libya to discuss its theoretical significance and potential applicability in other parts of the world, including Belgrade, Caracas, Madrid and Paris.

LAJ also engaged in intellectual and cultural activities that aimed to intensify the struggle against US imperialism across the world, and the Arab region. There is no doubt that the most important initiative being launched was the establishment of *al-Mathaba al-Alamiya*, also known

as the Anti-Imperialist Centre or The World Centre for Resistance of Imperialism, Zionism, Racism and Reaction, which hosted transnational solidarity conferences hoping to consolidate the revolutionary struggle against imperialism. Also, in 1977, in the aftermath of the historic UNGA Resolution 3379 condemning Zionism as a form of racism, the Libyan government hosted the first international symposium on such a topic, where renowned Palestinian scholars, including Edward Said, participated.

Despite LAJ ambitions and outreach of these activities, by the early 1980s, the neoliberal counter-revolution had been unleashed on the South of the world, and the Israeli army was just about to launch its invasion of Lebanon. At this juncture, the Libyan government entered a full collision course with the West, particularly the US, which began deploying military and economic warfare to curb them (Capasso, 2023b). The US had classified Libya's activities as consistently supporting international terrorism, which brought LAJ to be named as the first state sponsor of terrorism (SST) under the 1979 Export Administration Act. In such a context, *Zahaf* was founded. Coinciding with official creation of the Revolutionary Committees as an organ required to stir up the consciousness of the masses in 1978-79, *Zahaf* adopted a militant, yet incisive, tone when reflecting on current political affairs or conceptual discussions related to freedom, revolution, democracy, terrorism, and much more.

As described in its pages, *Zahaf* was established as a means at countering the mainstream media campaigns of 'manipulation, censorship, and insistent search for sensationalist thrills that characterized the interests of international capitalism and imperialism' (1982, 11). Several articles from both the Arabic and English version stress that *Zahaf* was a journal directed to entice a new revolutionary outlook to the world:

Do we write aesthetics and accessories so that our writing is transformed into folders that decorate the libraries of the bourgeoisie? Or will our writings become chatter in their salons? [...] Or do we write to breakthrough the reactionary and decrepit bourgeois culture that is debilitating and enlighten with a new culture and progressive values that calls for perfection, the most beautiful, and the most just that is being drawn by the popular Jamahiriya theory? (1983, 1)

Zahaf staunchly refused to fill its pages with 'media imperialism' (1983a, 12) and 'mercenary journalism' and cajolery aimed at tranquilizing the masses by providing 'interviews with the rich and famous [and] columns reserved to crosswords puzzles and horoscopes' (1983b, 16). Rather it was guided by three major principles that needed to guide the outlook of the newspaper: Firstly, it preached the need to undo the unjust order governing the world. Second, it supported the struggles of the poor, deprived and those fighting for freedom. Third, it incited the peoples of the world, including women, children, minorities, to rebel against imperialism, fascism and bourgeois concepts (Ibid.).

Inevitably, the desire to counter the mainstream imperialist media emerged and followed on the practical and political experiences of the Libyan government, which considered itself victim of an unjust and manipulative campaign against the achievements and ambitions of its revolution. For *Zahaf*, instant global communication had often been used to discredit or paint a picture of LAJ as the number one's enemy of the West (1982a, 1). More broadly, Western media coverage favoured Zionism – thus acted against the Arab and Palestinian cause (1982b, 6-7), and negatively portrayed national liberation movements worldwide. The media were considered not only a tool in the hands of rich and powerful 'press barons', but also – and most importantly – a 'lethal weapons in the hands of the US administration' (1983c, 14). As *Zahaf* recounts, through newspapers, radio stations – such as Radio Free Europe or Voice of America – and publishing firms (Saunders, 2001), the CIA 'understood the importance of the written or spoken word in presenting and protecting its charge, which is the US and its political and economic system' (1982c, 11). Hence, *Zahaf*

functioned as a counter-intellectual platform where the achievements of the Libyan revolution, as well as the struggle for freedom of the Third World, and especially Palestine, could circulate unfiltered.

What follows details two interrelated features of the anti-imperialist archives, namely, theorizing imperialism and foregrounding resistance.

Theorizing Imperialism

The first element that emerges from the anti-imperialist archives is how the pages of *Zahaf* reappropriate and redefine a term that was destined to become a long-standing tenet of US foreign policy (Ahmad & Barsamian, 2001), namely, terrorism. Rethinking terrorism not only opens up a space that radically interrogates the knowledge production of the imperialist library on various levels but also contradicts most of what the discipline of IR wrote about LAJ. When attending to the intellectual production of *Zahaf*, one sees how it intersects with questions of freedom and media manipulation. ‘The semantics of political violence clearly depend upon one’s political approach’ (1981, 8-9); relating to the nature of the imperialist world order. Therefore, the anti-imperialist archives become a site of theoretical production by and for the Global South, aiming to offer and guide its readers in comprehending the many faces of imperialism (1982d, 13). By countering what Western governments and news outlets made out of ‘terrorism,’ *Zahaf* develops its own understanding of terrorism as imperialism. Similar to what Samir Amin (2015) later formulation of the ‘two legs’ of imperialism – defined as per the combination of neoliberal policies and military interventions, *Zahaf* also centres its definition of imperialism around military and economic terrorism. This definition is always grounded in the practical experiences and obstacles that LAJ faced in developing an alternative political and developmental path to US-led imperialism.

In 1979, as abovementioned, Libya had in fact been the first country to be named as SST under the US Export Administration Act. For the US, the accusation stemmed from a range of activities that LAJ had been pursuing, such as its military and logistical support to Palestinians factions, the IRA, and many others (1984, 13). However, as *Zahaf* points out, ‘in the West, the quest for freedom in the Third World is often labelled as “meaningless terrorism”’ (1980, 11) or ‘Soviet-led communist threats’ (1983d, 7). In 1981, in an article titled ‘Terrorism in the History of the United States,’ imperialism is initially defined as ‘the policy of extending economic and political hegemony over other countries’, yet, as the article continues

‘this definition is not exhaustive and hides more than it reveals. Other nations obviously will not agree peacefully to come under imperialism’s hegemony: therefore, to achieve its aims, imperialism uses force. It is therefore not so much a “policy” as a military doctrine aimed at subjugating and controlling other peoples who differ racially and culturally and imposing upon these people a specific and alien political, military, economic and cultural authority’ (1981a, 8).

According to *Zahaf*, military force is considered as foundational to imperialism, thus a tool to clobber the struggles for national liberation worldwide. Hence, when approaching the question of international terrorism, *Zahaf* did not resort to the use of regime-type categories, such as those that the discipline of IR has adopted uncritically to describe the socio-political history of LAJ. Instead, *Zahaf* identifies terrorism as ‘the hallmark of the imperialist camp which will resort to any means to thwart the just aspirations of the oppressed people’ (1981b, 2). Designing a programme of action to guarantee its continuing world hegemony, the US is the geopolitical actor that uses ‘terrorist methods to counter the menace of peoples demanding their freedom’ (1982e, 4).

The conceptual understanding adopted by *Zahaf* emerges from and speaks to the empirical and practical experiences of socio-political formations of the Global South. First, terrorism is empirically associated to the covert or direct support of the US government for oppressive regimes around the world, since the US recurs to ‘open and blatant interference in the affairs of any country’ (1982f, 14) where its political or economic interests are threatened. One such example is America’s ‘secret war’ (1982h, 12) against the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, where ‘four thousand American troops will soon land in Honduras, half of them combat ready. Meanwhile, the US naval forces, including the massive 57,000-ton battleship “New Jersey” have already converged in the area [...] an attempt to subvert the popular government of Nicaragua’ (1983e, 2). In its passionate and defiant tone, *Zahaf* asks: ‘why is a small country like Nicaragua, with a population of a mere 2.8 million, such a nightmare to Reagan and his advisers in the Pentagon?’ The answer lies in the fact that Nicaragua was not a ‘communist threat’ but ‘an example of what can be achieved by a determined revolutionary government and inspires the oppressed peoples of neighbouring brutal dictatorships like El Salvador and Guatemala—regimes that Reagan is busy propping up in the name of “democracy”’ (Ibid.). As the case of Nicaragua illustrates, the real threat that the US sought to neutralize in its ‘backyard’ was never communism per se, but the virus of nationalism itself – the possibility that a small country could exercise sovereign control over its resources and developmental path, setting a precedent that might inspire others to do the same. The US had to maintain global ‘positions of disparity’ and could not afford ‘the luxury of altruism’ – anti-communist rhetoric thus served as an ideological instrument to legitimize what was, in practice, the suppression of sovereign self-determination wherever it threatened US economic and strategic interests (Petersen et al., 1976, Document 4).

Second, terrorism is also empirically articulated in the strategy of the US to expand its military footprint across the world, seen as ‘the practical definition of imperialism’ (1982i, 5). Military bases and personnel in about sixty countries of the world (1982j; 1983f)⁵ are central for the ‘control of the waterway and access to and from it guarantees effective marine control’ of, for instance, an oil-producing region – the Arab region – that is situated at ‘meeting-point of three continents [...] the bases will afford America the ability to intervene at a moment’s notice in any attempt to frustrate any popular rising’ (1982j, 4) against its allies. Whereas LAJ had successfully expelled and shut down the British and American military bases from its territory in the aftermath of the 1969 Revolution, numerous countries in the region – especially in the 1980s – proceeded in the opposite direction. They favoured the installation of US bases and the Rapid Deployment Forces (1983g, 5), which were later inactivated and became part of US CENTCOM (1982k, 14).

The anti-imperialist archives reveal further to their readers how the US could only maintain its ‘equilibrium of terror’ by balancing the progressive expansion of the military industrial complex to the needs of capital under the newly established Reagan administration. Reaganomics, which were also and interchangeably called economic terrorism, are described as ‘the traditional way of refloating a wrecked economy in the capitalist world through war’ (1982l, 9). A more subtle and flexible means of guaranteeing America’s dominant position in the world than military force (1982m, 13), economic terrorism was not simply understood as an internal mode of economic production (capitalism), but it primarily consisted of a world-system tied to American imperialism, seeking to exploit workers and, more widely, the developing countries of the South (See Figure 1). It acted as ‘an octopus, but one with many more than eight arms [which] seeks to envelope the economies of the developing countries, ensnaring them in its trap so that will never be able to escape’ (1981c, 11).

In such a context, ‘two key means of helping or harming the developing world—the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—have now become the most important weapons in the Reagan administration’s economic armoury, reserved for use against politically recalcitrant developing states’ (1982n, 18). As *Zahaf*’s analysis makes clear, these institutions



Figure 1. It shows the US, represented by a police officer with a mask of bandit, stealing the wealth of the peoples' world (1982ss, 14)/

were not merely instruments of economic coercion; they were also carriers of the modernization paradigm embedded in the imperialist library – the assumption that development in the Global South must follow a Western trajectory, disciplining those who pursued alternative paths. *Zahaf* tracks at length how the institutional policies of these organizations aligned with the interests of the US through the weaponization of trade and aid. For instance, while the IFIs had stopped Vietnam and Afghanistan from receiving economic grants, they had granted aid to countries that espoused US interests in the Arab region, such as Israel, Egypt, and Sudan (1982o, 14). In tracing the early attempts to impose structural adjustments, *Zahaf* reveals how Third World countries saw such massive projects ‘as barely veiled attempts by the US to link their economies even more closely to the American one’ (1982p, 11).

Therefore, for *Zahaf* the notion of ‘rogue state’ should be ascribed solely to the US-led global order – namely, imperialism – bent on waging a World War on the Third World. The newspaper also challenges the idea that the Third World War should be considered as the ‘long-foreseen and dreaded nuclear confrontation between northern superpowers’ (1981d, 16). For *Zahaf*, a World War was already happening: it combined ‘terrorist cum conventional wars launched by American imperialism, with the active assistance of local puppets [...] against progressive Third World countries which have managed to throw off the yoke of colonialism and imperialism’ (1981e, 2). As the next section will show, the main targets of imperialist terrorism were all those socio-political formations that, like Libya, were waging a struggle for their national liberation.

The final aspect concerning the question of terrorism entails the provision of a counter-history of that term, which aims to ground and situate this notion both in a long historical trajectory and from within the imperialist core. ‘Terror has long been an essential feature of repression at home, as well as abroad [...] there is really no difference between the internal and external mechanisms of

terror, as far as the United States is concerned' (1981f, 11). The roots of US terrorism and its 'savage history' are traced back to the 'arrogant Western expression and lie' of the discovery of America, which is considered to be the event 'where American terrorism started, and it has been going on for nearly half a millennium' (1982q, 12). In an essay titled 'The Indian Genocide: Roots of US Terrorism' (1981g, 14-15), *Zahaf* reconstructs the ideology of Manifest Destiny that propelled European colonialism, linking it back to the search for El Dorado that drove the Spanish conquistadores to wipe out the Aztec civilization. With the so-called birth of the US, the essay then shows how genocide continued in other forms: through legal means, such as the Removal Act in 1830; the violation of the nearly four hundred treaties with Indian tribes; as well as the Americanization of the Indians, after their military resistance was largely neutralized. This 'five-hundred-years long act of terrorism and genocide, although not unique in the analysis of history, is certainly the greatest crime committed, on any scale of values one may choose' (Ibid.). In such a context, a parallel is traced between the US army presence in the Florida swamps when facing the resistance of the Seminole tribe, and its invasion of rice paddies in Vietnam. As *Zahaf* asserts, 'a nation which gave birth in such an orgy of destruction was bound to consider such means as the natural and right way to establish its authority' (Ibid.) both at home and abroad.

Moreover, when zooming on the domestic nature of terror in a capitalist society, *Zahaf* often recounted the stories of black and Afro-American communities (1982r, 10). One such story relates to the case of Ernest Lacy, an unemployed youth from Milwaukee and with a history of mental disorders, who had been wrongfully detained and charged, dying in police custody 'from an interruption of oxygen flow to his brain, as a result of pressure on his chest and neck' (1981h, 10). The violence unleashed on black communities and Native Americans, is also contextualized vis-à-vis the neoliberal economic policies pursued by Ronald Reagan (1982s, 10; 1983h, 14) and Margaret Thatcher (1983i, 6). So, while US terror – as mentioned above – is a primary technique to control the progressive forces of the Third World, 'added to that must be the domestic terror directed at the working people of the nation' (1980a, 3). Such analyses and historical parallels were not only used to explain the long durée of terrorism, but also to show how resistance could emerge organically amongst all those socio-political formations that had fallen victim of US terror.

Foregrounding Resistance

'It is not terrorism which scares them [the imperialists], they, after all, are the foremost practitioners of terrorism. It is resistance which they fear and with good reason, since more and more of the world's people are rising to the challenge and engaging in the kind of active resistance which will one day bring the whole imperialist edifice crashing down' (1982t, 13).

As argued thus far, *Zahaf*'s analyses directly stemmed from the material obstacles that LAJ faced in charting an alternative developmental and political path to imperialism and capitalism. The anti-imperialist archives articulate the transformative ways of ordering and relating to the world that countries of the Global South developed when confronting US imperialism. They not only function as a site for philosophical inquiry on the mainstream concepts drawn to frame and understand the world, but they also foreground an ethos and a praxis of resistance, where alternative theoretical concepts emanate from the struggle to re-own history beyond the imperialist edifice. For the anti-imperialist archives, the degree of social determination that imperialism has on the Third World is never understood in a fatalistic manner. On the contrary, they centre the agency of socio-political formations of the Global South and its peoples, their advances in the struggle for national liberation and alternative developmental paths.

For instance, when explaining the aggressive capitalist expansion waged on the Global South in the 1980s – what later came to be known as neoliberal era, *Zahaf* constantly pointed out the necessary role that ‘the cooperation of national governments’ (1981i, 12)⁶ had for the expansion or curbing of imperialism. In other words, colonial imperialism could not be pinned down as the sole responsible actor for exploiting the Third World. The aggressive wave of neoliberal reforms ultimately was launched in response to the gradual decline of the old European imperialist stranglehold over the Third World. It had been ‘the awakening of the consciousness of the peoples of the Third world and their ensuing struggle for liberation’ (1981i, 16) that had weakened the power of imperialism, now looking for new tools – that is, sanctions, trade, and so on that is – to suppress the struggle for national liberation. This dialectical relationship incarnates the essence of *Zahaf*, determined to foreground an ethos of resistance that can imagine a new world structure.

In such a context, there are three main aspects that recur throughout *Zahaf* showing how resistance as praxis must be pursued by the Global South. First, resistance is linked to the capacity of a country to exercise sovereign control over its economic policies, especially its natural resources. Second, it requires political solidarity and revolutionary unity, within and beyond the Arab region, grounded in consciousness building and armed struggle. Third, it demands revolutionary counter-violence as a necessary response to the historical *durée* of imperialist and colonial violence. These three dimensions constitute a unified praxis where the material basis of sovereignty enables the political conditions for solidarity, which in turn necessitates the capacity to defend both by force.

Beginning with the first, oil occupies a central place in the pages of the newspaper (1982u, 1), particularly due to then ongoing oil gluts of the 1980s. The sudden drop of oil prices caused by the concerted actions of the US and Saudi Arabia had prompted *Zahaf* to discuss how natural resources – thus oil – could be used as a weapon (1981m, 4) to either undo or maintain the imperialist structure.

In the aftermath of decolonization, one of the initiatives that allowed developing countries to protect their economic interests were the setting up of commodity cartels, like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). These organizations not only incarnated a desire for a new international economic order that could provide a larger decision-making role to Global South countries (1982v, 9), but also the willingness of single countries to regain their sovereign power over natural resources. For instance, Libya, following the 1969 revolution, ‘sent shivers up the oil companies’ collective spine, launching a veritable assault on their exploitative practices’ (1982w, 9). By 1971, the revolutionary government got an increase of 30 cents a barrel (to \$2.53) and a further \$0.02 each year for the following five years from the French oil giant, Occidental. Within two months, all other twenty Western oil companies operating in the country agreed to similar terms, resulting not only in a majority (54–58%) profit share for Libya, but also triggering similar changes across the region, from Iran to Kuwait.

In the long term, ‘the US and Saudi Arabia, stood to lose from OPEC’s new power’ because the US was ‘ill-suited, both temperamentally and economically, to belt-tightening’ (Ibid.) and thus threatened by the rise of oil prices, which could be directed to fulfil the needs for popular and regional development (1982x, 6). The US in fact considered Libyan ‘extremist militancy’ as ‘undermin[ing] conservative Arab governments in the Gulf, making them more susceptible to political pressures to use oil as a political weapon against US-Middle East policies’, thus challenging Western support of Israel (Burton and Howard 2014, Document 21). Hence, *Zahaf* points out that the artificial deflation of oil prices that Saudi Arabia engineered with the US not only subverted the old price structure gained via OPEC, but also weakened the political and economic potential of those Arab states that did not align with US policies in the region, preventing them from technological development (1981n, 4). In doing so, the ‘oil gluts’ had ‘the effect of reducing OPEC’s ability to proverbially point

the gun at the west's head' (1981n, 3),⁷ thus making developing countries fall victim of 'a modern-day international Dracula, bent on sucking the blood of the world's people' (1981o, 16). As seen throughout *Zahaf's* pages, the anti-imperialist archives undermine directly the IR conceptual categories presented above (especially the rentier state paradigm), showing instead how access to, and control of oil routes, was a determining element for Western imperialist powers vying over the control of the Arab region (1981p).

Overall, *Zahaf* understood the oil gluts as part of a dialectical process. On the one hand, those policies were part of the imperialist war denying 'the Arab nation the ability to further its economic development and achieve independence from the technological dominance of the western world' (1982z, 14), especially in the aftermath of decolonization. On the other hand, the oil gluts were a reminder of the 'philosophical difference' between a reactionary and a revolutionary government of the Global South. Whereas Libyans 'have been using their oil for popular needs' (1982w, 9), rejecting 'both surrender and American guardianship for the Arab nation' the Saudi rulers 'cannot take their own decision, because their decisions are made for them in Washington' (1982x, 6). Saudi Arabia uses oil 'as a spinal cord of an investment system—that of the United States—which is not geared to the independent development of the Arabian economy' (1982aa, 8).

Like natural resources, trade and foreign aid could also become a tool of resistance. For instance, *Zahaf* reports how the US administration had not hesitated to halt food assistance to Grenada and Nicaragua as part of its Caribbean basin initiative. Yet, as the invasion of Grenada followed suit to halt the national liberation struggle, aid promptly resumed – respectively \$3.475 million for Grenada and \$5 million to train the police and army for each of the six countries that had supported the invasion (1984a, 6). The 'trade weapon' did not always manage to achieve its desired results. Rather it often encouraged an increase in trade amongst friendly countries of the South, such as Libya's provision of \$100 million to Nicaragua to cover a balance of payment deficit at the time when the Reagan administration was stepping up its campaign to isolate the country economically (1983j, 7). In this regard, *Zahaf* never failed to provide a message suggesting that people could gain a space of autonomy to fight back, especially by forging alliances and political solidarity.

Turning to the second element, solidarity is articulated at the level of both armed struggle and consciousness building (1980b, 12; 1984b, 10-11; 1982bb, 8-9; 1982cc, 1). In particular, rich empirical and conceptual discussions surface immediately vis-à-vis the Palestinian national liberation struggle, and the need to confront Zionism.⁸ For *Zahaf*, Palestine is a prism to understand and rethink the political urgency for Arab unity that the region requires in order to free itself from imperialist hegemony.

For these reasons, *Zahaf's* pages offer lengthy analyses on the relationship between Israel and the US. By dissecting the ideological and material nature of this alliance, *Zahaf* aims to show why the national liberation of Palestine embodies an international struggle against imperialism, requiring solidarity across people and regions of the world. The occupation of Palestine is historically identified as a strategic asset for US imperialism, especially after the withdrawal of the British from Mandate Palestine, due to its proximity to the 'region's most important strategic focal point, the Suez Canal' (1983k, 9). Comparing the Israeli massacres of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon to the US war on Vietnam, the newspaper uncompromisingly condemns, and reiterates how 'Zionism and extremist terrorism are one and the same' (1982dd, 14). Such condemnations are not sweeping political judgements, but situated in larger and deep analytical takes.

Zahaf describes the ideological similarities between the US and Israel as sharing the 'same racist contempt for a supposedly inferior people. The Americans share with the Zionists a worldwide view which is coloured by similar fears of encirclement by a hostile

developing world' (1982ee, 9). Yet, the centrality of their military alliance is highlighted. The increasing military support of the Reagan administration to Israel is captured in the *longue durée* of history, starting with the sale of 50 F-4 fighters in 1968, Black September in Jordan in 1970, the bombing of Iraq nuclear plant in 1981, and the then ongoing (in 1982) invasion of Lebanon (1982ff, 2). Analyses further stress the unique nature of this relation: 'the Israeli regime remains the cutting edge of US policy in the region [because] Israel is the one base the American will always be able to count on in the gravest of emergencies' (1983k, 9) and 'a passing bridge for American imperialism' (1982gg, 9).

Grounded firmly on the principles of Pan Arabism,⁹ *Zahaf*'s relentlessly invokes unity against Zionism as the fundamental liberatory step required to fight the imperialist and its reactionary allies in the region. Unity is not only a 'necessity' (1982hh, 1) but a revolutionary 'imperative requiring a lot of political work' (1982ii, 14). A united revolutionary front is conceived as a critical step to 'ensure that the US and its surrogates do not have a quiet life in any part of the world', but also 'shows the depth of global popular resistance against imperialist diktats' (1983l, 3). The insistence on unity does not fall short of criticism, since the dialectical relationship between unity and liberation can only be ignited when the masses' role is recognized (1982jj, 6), by building unity of peoples' and not governments (1982kk, 15).

At this juncture, when *Zahaf* posits how the theoretical struggle must always follow the political one (see [Figure 2](#)), the third element – revolutionary counter-violence – comes to the fore. For *Zahaf*, a praxis of resistance must confront the historical *durée* of violence that unites Western colonialism, imperialism and Zionism. Such violence is compared to a fast-moving train that the revolutionary masses ought to destroy (1982ll, 2), 'otherwise it will commit against us the same genocide pursued in Palestine and now Lebanon' (1983m, 16). Hence, for the Third World, violence is 'a tool imposed by reality' (1982 mm, 13). While violence constitutes the essence of imperialist terrorism, as abovementioned; revolutionary counter-violence is seen as a necessary strategy to confront imperialist domination. *Zahaf* dwells on how 'the history of the world is full of examples of what an armed people can do. Wars of national liberation, like those in Algeria, Vietnam and China, have all shown how invincible a people can be when given their arms and training to fight for their cause' (1982nn, 7). Reminiscent of the tension present in Frantz Fanon's writings on violence and liberation ([1961] 2001), the anti-imperialist archives remind their readers that 'weapons are useless without strategy' (1982oo, 13; 1980c, 13) yet, they never absolve revolutionaries of the need to justify its use, especially when confronted with reactionary violence (1983o, 13).

Once again, these insights emerged and followed on LAJ's actual policies, such as the attempt to establish a people's army (1982pp, 2; 1982qq, 11), as well as its logistical and military support for armed struggle in various parts of the world. Especially for Palestine, a significant amount of Libya's budget and political activities were 'directed at the number one enemy, Israel' (CIA 1974, 19). In 1973 only, Libya had provided at least \$50 million in arms and supplies to the Palestinian fedayeen, together with training facilities in Libya for perhaps as many as 2000 guerrillas, offering logistical and cash support, as well as extended documentation and asylum (CIA 1973, 1974). By 1979, when Egypt and Israel signed the Camp-David treaty, the Libyan government – like Syria – firmly rejected it ([Central Intelligence, 1982](#)), which eventually led to the designation of SST and the US enforcement of an economic embargo on spare parts in the aviation and oil fields. Moreover, by the early 1980s, LAJ had not only began supporting the Chadian anti-French group, Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad (FROLINAT), SWAPO in Namibia and the ANC in South Africa (1982rr, 12), but also paid over a total of \$12,655,863 to the Irish Republican Army.



Figure 2. A vignette calling for Arab Unity, showing the people's fists holding the means to work – shovel, rake, and so on – and defend themselves – a rifle (1981q, 5).

Overall, *Zahaf* is an example of how the anti-imperialist archives foreground an ethos of resistance that corresponds to the historical ambitions of the Global South.

Conclusion: Towards Anti-Imperialist IR

Anti-imperialist archives are a space of theoretical production, comprising buried archival sources from Global South countries that were at the forefront of the struggle against US imperialism. They offer a counter-reading of the academic canons that have been persistently used to describe the historical trajectory of Global South countries within the discipline of IR, especially those accused of undermining the US-led international order. Having been at the receiving end of imperialist violence, the physical presence of these texts has been wasted, thus lost or dispersed in their countries of origin, which coincided with the larger destruction of the national sovereignty of

Libya (Moyo and Yeros 2011). The physical existence of these archives, however, has been kept in the West, perpetuating a condition of intellectual and methodological imperialism for the Global South (Alatas, 2000).

Hence, to preserve, defend, retrace and reappropriate the material existence of these archives is a moment of un-silencing of the past (Trouillot, 2015) that must not simply attune us to otherwise lost ideas. It should also point out to more fundamental directions of inquiry: First, like decolonial IR aptly does, we must come to terms with the complicities of the discipline in upholding imperialist domination. The study and revival of the anti-imperialist archives show that LAJ was more than an authoritarian, rogue and rentier state. Rather it indicates how LAJ was building knowledge infrastructures that sought and cohered with the historical ambitions of numerous other socio-political formations of the Global South. Almost 15 years after 2011, these scholarly endeavours assume an ever more present relevance because they can help us shed more light on why LAJ had to face war and destruction. Crucially, however, the destruction of LAJ's archives is not exceptional. It belongs to a systematic pattern of epistemological warfare that accompanies imperialist intervention at critical junctures, targeting precisely those knowledge infrastructures that anti-imperialist formations had built. In Palestine, the 1948 Nakba saw the systematic looting of over 60,000 books and manuscripts from Palestinian homes and institutions – seized by the Haganah and the Jewish National Library, catalogued as 'abandoned property,' and absorbed into Israeli collections (Amit, 2011). In 1982, the Israeli army looted the PLO Research Centre in Beirut during its invasion of Lebanon, confiscating the Centre's entire archive of some 25,000 volumes in Arabic, Hebrew and French – what its director had described as perhaps the world's largest collection of manuscripts on the question of Palestine (Gribetz, 2024).¹⁰ Since 2023, Israel's assault on Gaza has systematically destroyed every university in the Strip, along with hundreds of schools, libraries, and the Central Archives of Gaza containing 150 years of historical records, in what UN experts have termed 'scholasticide' (Alqaisiya and Perugini 2025). In Iraq, the 2003 US-led invasion resulted in the burning and looting of the Iraq National Library and Archives, the destruction of university and manuscript collections across the country, and the seizure of millions of pages of Ba'athist state records – materials that were in some cases transferred to the US (Al-Tikriti, 2007; Hatuqa, 2018). In each case, archive destruction does not merely accompany regime change; it is constitutive of it, aimed at severing the epistemological and theoretical genealogies through which global South anti-imperialist formations understood and resisted domination.

Second, a more critical point vis-à-vis decolonial IR must be raised, which requires scholars to take more seriously into account the intellectual possibilities offered by the materialist/Marxist method as articulated by the anti-imperialist tradition of the Global South. Here, there is an epistemological distinction that must be made. Many approaches within decolonial IR invoke 'colonialism' as a trans-historical structure – a continuity of domination stretching from 1492 to the present – without sufficiently analysing the specific forms that imperialism assumes at different stages of capitalist development. The anti-imperialist archives operate differently. As this article has shown, *Zahaf* periodized imperialism: it distinguished formal colonialism from US-led financial imperialism, theorized the specific mechanisms of economic and military terrorism through which the post-1945 order functioned, and traced how those mechanisms shifted from direct colonial extraction to dollarized debt and structural adjustment. This historical precision is what makes the method of the anti-imperialist archives *materialist rather than idealist* – their analyses are anchored to concrete stages of capitalist expansion and the specific obstacles that Global South formations encountered. These archives incarnate the wasted knowledge infrastructure that many countries in the South, that is, Iraq, Palestine, had built to counter imperialism in real time. They do not simply speak of a pluriversal future, where theoretical abstraction is too often generated away from material reality (Geneciran, 2024). Rather these archives offer conceptual analyses whose conditions of possibility and articulation stem directly from the

alternative developmental paths that were being pursued. The broader restructuring of the world order, grounded in the pursuit of regional solidarity and national liberation, shaped what needed to be written and emphasized in *Zahaf*. These analyses, therefore, foreground the material and conceptual weapons used in the struggle against imperialism, which persists to this date.

While *Zahaf* was published at the height of the neoliberal counter-revolution, amid a looming possibility of nuclear conflagration and the then unfolding Israeli genocidal assault on Lebanon, the imperialist problematic has not merely continued – it has entered a more violent and naked phase that is itself symptomatic of structural and civilization crisis. The terrorist imperialism that *Zahaf* diagnosed has deepened: the ongoing destruction of Gaza, the escalation of global militarism, and the erosion of the institutional and juridical frameworks that once mediated imperialist power all point to an order that can no longer reproduce itself through consent and resorts increasingly to violence and militarism. Yet, it is precisely this intensification that renders the anti-imperialist archives and their epistemological boldness even more urgent. For the temptation of the present moment is to personify power – to reduce the crisis of the US-led order to a second Trump presidency or to the contingencies of individual policy – thereby obscuring the structural processes of which such figures are an expression. The materialist method that the anti-imperialist archives articulate offers the necessary corrective: it insists on locating political phenomena within the *longue durée* of imperialism, its cycles of expansion and crisis, and the counter-movements that the Global South has historically mounted against it. Indeed, if the violence of imperialism is more unrestrained today, it is because the South's challenge to the imperialist order – from the rise of new axes of South-South cooperation to the reassertion of sovereign developmental paths – has not ceased but intensified. The anti-imperialist archives must therefore be reclaimed not as relics of a defeated past but as living theoretical resources forged in conditions of struggle that mirror, and illuminate, our own historical moment. Overall, *Zahaf*'s combined effort to theorize the nature of imperialism – while resisting its clutch – incarnates an intellectual and political horizon (Kamola & Calkivik, 2024) that the scholarly community should rigorously engage with.

ORCID iD

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

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Notes

1. From hereafter, *Zahaf*.
2. Through numerous conversations I had with Libyan academics and officials, these documents have since disappeared or destroyed.
3. As part of my research project, I collected documents and newspapers linked to The Green Book; the *Jamahiriyah Review* (1980–1984); brochures produced by LAJ representation at the UN (1978–1982); Libyan newspapers, such as *al-Fajar al-Jadid*, *al-Jamahiriyah*, and the numerous communiques of Libyan student communities abroad.
4. As per the Turkish published version, I was only able to access it after having acquired a collection of 117 issues through an online shopping platform, *Ebay*. The costs of the looting, destruction, and commodification of LAJ archives has been immense.

5. While such figures captured the year 1982–3, by 2015 the US military had expanded its bases to over 70 countries worldwide (see Vine, 2015).
6. In another article (1981j, 8-9), the case of the military junta in Chile led by Pinochet is provided as an illustrative case of this dynamic.
7. The issue of technology is also treated in separate articles (see 1982y).
8. It is worth mentioning some of the other aspects that are explored consistently through the newspaper, such as the Israeli attempt to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism; the similarities between South Africa and Israel; the Israeli violations of international law and UN resolutions; as well as the Zionist support for reactionary regimes in Latin America.
9. While there is no space to discuss this at length, *Zahaf* also provides lengthy analyses on the centrality of African Unity, a principle that will become more central to Libyan foreign policy since the late 1990s.
10. For a good overview on Israeli plunder of Palestinian archives and culture, see also this set of references, available at: <https://blogs.library.columbia.edu/global-studies/destruction-and-pillage-of-palestinian-cultural-heritage-archives-and-libraries-since-1948/>.

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Author Biography

Matteo Capasso is a Professor at the School of Country and Region Studies, Northwest University, Xi'an, People's Republic of China. He is the author of *Everyday Politics in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya* (Syracuse University Press, 2023) and co-editor of *The Imperialist Question in the Middle East and North Africa* (Routledge, 2025). He is also Editor-in-Chief of the peer-reviewed journal, *Middle East Critique*.

Appendix

Zahaf Al-Akhdar – Documents

- 1980:
1980. What is Terrorism? September 20, 11.
- 1980a. Ku Klux Klan hailed as heroes, December 7, 3.
- 1980b. The need for Third World solidarity, December 27, 12 (in Arabic).
- 1980c. Revolutionary violence versus reactionary violence, October 11, 13.
- 1981:
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