

Canada signs on for imperialist campaign against Libya

Keith Jones
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Canada's Conservative government has dispatched a navy frigate to Libya's shores and special forces to Malta in preparation for military intervention in the oil-rich North African country.

According to CTV news reports and an article in Tuesday's *Globe and Mail*, some Canadian special forces troops are already active inside Libya. Their reputed mission is to assist the evacuation of Canadians and other foreign nationals caught up in Libya's nascent civil war. They may well be performing other tasks, however. One of the principal functions of the Canadian Armed Forces' special forces is to carry out surveillance and otherwise lay the groundwork for larger military operations.

Canada's newspaper of record, the *Globe* also reports that Ottawa is championing, behind the scenes, the proposal made by Britain and supported by elements with the US political elite for the "international community"—i.e., the western imperialist powers—to impose a "no-fly zone" over Libya. Such action, as US Defence Secretary Robert Gates bluntly told a US Congressional Committee Wednesday, would constitute an act of war and involve large-scale fighting. To be successful, the US-led coalition imposing such a no-fly zone would have to destroy the air defenses of Colonel Gaddafi's Libyan regime at the outset.

Gates' testimony, as well as remarks made by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton before a separate Congressional committee Wednesday, were aimed at dampening expectations of immediate US military intervention in Libya. Yet they both indicated that a no fly-zone and even an outright invasion cannot be excluded. Moreover, the US and its allies are continuing to pour men and military equipment into the region.

That Canada's Conservative government is ready to deploy war planes to help enforce a no-fly zone over Libya was publicly signaled by Senator Hugh Segal, a former top

advisor to the current prime minister, Stephen Harper, and one-time chief of staff to Brian Mulroney. "If asked," to contribute some of its fighters, "I believe Canada's response would be positive," Segal told the *Globe*.

On Wednesday, some 24 hours after Canada's government announced plans to deploy the HMCS Charlottetown to the Mediterranean, the patrol ship left Halifax harbor with 240 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel aboard.

In explaining the Charlottetown's mission, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said its first task will be to assist any evacuation efforts that are still underway when it reaches Libya's coast in the middle of next week. It could also deliver "humanitarian assistance"—Canada's government has pledged \$5 million in aid—but only to areas of the country not under the control of Gaddafi's regime.

The Charlottetown, continued MacKay, is further charged with enforcing any sanctions that are imposed on Libya by Canada and its allies.

Canada's defence minister also signaled that the ship's deployment, which could last for as long as 6 months, has a fourth purpose—to place Canada in a position to contribute to action against Libya even more aggressive than a naval blockade. Said MacKay, "We are there for all inevitabilities. And NATO is looking at this as well ... [T]his is taken as a precautionary and staged measure."

Like the other imperialist powers, the Canadian government is depicting its plans to intervene militarily in Libya as born of altruism—of abhorrence at the repressive actions of Colonel Gaddafi's regime, fear for the lives of ordinary Libyans as the country descends into civil war, and concern for the spread of democracy in North Africa and the Middle East.

This is poppycock. If Canada's government is plotting with the US and the European Union to intervene in Libya, it

is because the popular upsurge that has toppled Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia, hobbled Gaddafi, and challenged governments throughout North Africa and the Middle East is threatening vital imperialist economic and geo-strategic interests.

The Canadian government—and this is saying a lot—was even more unwilling than the US administration of Barack Obama to call for Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, let alone the dismantling of his authoritarian regime.

Time and again during the three weeks of mass protests and strikes that culminated in Mubarak’s February 12 resignation, Harper, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon, and other leading Conservatives publicly declared security and order—i.e. maintenance of the existing set up in which Egypt served as the linchpin of a US-led, Israeli-policed Middle East—to be their principal concern.

Under conditions in which Egyptians have been denied their elementary democratic rights for decades, Harper and Cannon justified their stubborn support for Mubarak by saying that it was “not Canada’s role to tell the Egyptians what to do.”

With Egypt’s economy increasingly paralyzed by strikes and mounting concerns in ruling circles that the country’s conscript army would rebel against orders to crush the popular movement, Washington and the Egyptian military ultimately concluded that they could best thwart the social and democratic aspirations of the Egyptian masses by ushering Mubarak from power.

The Harper government—given Canada’s limited global reach—was largely a spectator to all this. But it was quick to announce itself satisfied with Egypt’s “democratic transition,” that is with Mubarak’s replacement by a military junta whose principal watchword is that the “revolution is over.”

In the case of Libya, the Harper Conservative government, like its Liberal predecessor, was more than willing to do business with Gaddafi once his regime renounced its anti-imperialist pretensions, reopened the country’s oil industry to foreign investment, and integrated itself into the US’s “war on terror” by collaborating with the CIA.

In explaining the sanctions Canada imposed on Libya February 27, government House leader John Baird made clear that they will not impact on the commercial activities of the Canadian companies now operating in Libya,

including the oil-producer Suncor and the engineering giant SNC-Lavalin.

While supporting the Harper government’s deployment of the Charlottetown, Canada’s corporate media has shown little enthusiasm for a large-scale military intervention in Libya. This is not because of qualms about the use of the CAF as an instrument of war so as to advance the predatory interests of the Canadian ruling elite around the world. The *Globe*, which headlined its lead editorial Tuesday, “Deter Gaddafi, but keep boots off the ground,” ran a series of articles last fall arguing that as result of Canada’s leading role in the Afghan war Canada’s elite now possesses a battled-tested military and should not refrain from using it in the years to come.

The concerns expressed by the Canadian media over military action in Libya echo those being voiced by leading representatives of the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Atlantic: pacifying the huge and largely desert country will likely be difficult; the leaders of the opposition to Gaddafi, most of them former members of his regime, are largely unknown; the invasion could stir anti-imperialist sentiment in a country that was subjugated to decades of brutal direct colonial rule; the US has yet to extricate itself from the Iraq and Afghan wars and the invasion of a third predominantly Muslim country could further fuel hostility to the US in the region.

At the same time, the US remains determined to uphold its control of the Middle East. Indeed, its relative economic decline has only made its world position more dependent on its ability to assert its strategic dominance over the world’s principal oil-exporting region.

Libya itself is not just a major oil producer. It borders on Tunisia and Egypt, as well as oil-rich Algeria, which was convulsed by working-class protests in January.

The Harper government will undoubtedly follow Washington’s lead in respect to military action in Libya. But from the get-go it has made clear that, if asked, Canada will rush to answer Washington’s call to participate in imperialist war in North Africa.



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