Western powers exploit Libyan crisis to step up intervention plans

Mike Head
5 March 2011

Under the cynical cover of addressing a humanitarian crisis in Libya, the US and its European allies are intensifying military operations and economic measures directed against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

Amid preparations for a possible armed intervention, US marines have arrived in Greece for deployment to US warships off the Libyan coast, and US military cargo planes have commenced flights to the Tunisian-Libyan border.

What began as a popular revolt against the repressive Gaddafi regime is increasingly being channelled, with the help of an interim administration in Benghazi, Libya's second city, into the pretext for an imperialist intervention. Such an operation would seek to establish a *de facto* client state in Libya. It would help imperialist forces assert control over the country's large oil and gas fields and serve as a bastion of reaction against the working-class uprisings sweeping the entire region, from Morocco to Iraq.

British and European leaders welcomed President Barack Obama's statement on Thursday, in which he demanded Gaddafi's removal and pointedly refused to rule out the imposition of a militarily-enforced "no-fly" zone over Libya. His remarks were an indication of US readiness to support an operation to oust the regime and install a compliant government of the type being shaped in Benghazi.

The London-based *Guardian* reported yesterday that British Prime Minister David Cameron, who had earlier called for Britain and its allies to draw up plans for a no-fly zone, "was offered important support by Barack Obama on Thursday night. American military planners had been instructed to draw up a full range of options, including a no-fly zone, Obama said at the White House during a press conference with his Mexican counterpart, Felipe Calderón."

The British newspaper stated that Cameron and Obama now agreed on "the need for military planning if there is a greater humanitarian catastrophe or if Gaddafi becomes even more aggressive; and the absolute need for Gaddafi to stand down."

According to the *Guardian*, Cameron and other European leaders had been left in no doubt by Washington that the European Union should be seen to be taking the lead in responding to the Libyan crisis. For that purpose, Cameron had "shown leadership" by openly advocating a no-fly zone, and was now working with French President Nicolas Sarkozy in drawing up plans for an emergency European Union summit in Brussels next Friday.

The Russian government, which holds a veto at the UN, has publicly opposed a no-fly zone. But British Foreign Minister William Hague said that while "ideally" such a zone would need to be sanctioned by the UN, that was not essential. No-fly zones operated over Iraq by the US and Britain, as initial steps toward ousting the Saddam Hussein regime, did not receive such Security Council approval.

Washington is anxious for its European allies to take the front position, at least publicly, precisely because of the hated record of US imperialism in the Middle East. This includes not only its ongoing wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq, but its role in the post-World War II oppression of Libya itself.

In Libya itself, after World War II, the US and Britain took advantage of the defeat of Italy to continue the brutal oppression of the Libyan people, up to half of whom had died under Italian colonial rule from 1911 to 1943. Although a puppet king, Idris I, was installed after formal independence in 1951, Libya's neo-colonial status continued—symbolised by the establishment of the giant US Wheelus air base near Tripoli, which functioned as a hub for US military operations across North Africa.

The discovery of oil in 1959 only tightened the American, British and Italian domination of Libya, the hostility toward which created the conditions for Colonel Gaddafi's military coup in 1969. One of Gaddafi's first actions was to demand the closure of the Wheelus base, which—like his nationalisation of Libya's oil industry—initially gave the colonel anti-imperialist credentials and a base of popular support.

Yesterday, Britain said it was sending several planes to airlift thousands of Egyptians stuck in refugee camps on the Tunisian-Libyan border, while France said it was dispatching a helicopter carrier to waters off Libya to help evacuate civilians. The British government also reported that one of its border agency vessels had intercepted a ship bound for Libya and seized "a significant quantity of Libyan currency."

Washington is also positioning itself to militarily intervene, in the name of evacuating some of the estimated 180,000 foreign workers who have fled Libya. Two US amphibious warships, the USS Kearsarge and the USS Ponce, joined the USS Barry in the Mediterranean, and 400 marines were flown to a naval base at Souda

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Bay on the Greek island of Crete, ready to be transferred to the Kearsarge. Base spokesman Paul Farley said they had been deployed "as part of contingency planning to provide the president flexibility on full range of option regarding Libya."

Pentagon spokesman Colonel David Lapan said the military had not been given orders beyond two cargo flights to the Libyan-Tunisian border on Friday and a planned transport of refugees from the Tunisian side of the border today. But he announced that the overall military effort, including movements of ships had been code-named Operation Odyssey Dawn.

Unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the Western powers are being used to try to cripple the Gaddafi regime, and seize Libyan assets. US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday that the US had frozen about $32 billion in assets held by the Libyan Investment Authority, Libya's sovereign wealth fund. Obama described the measures as the "most rapid and forceful set of sanctions that have ever been applied internationally." On the same day, the British government froze similar assets, including holdings at the HSBC bank, worth about $3.2 billion, on top of about $1.6 billion in assets linked to Gaddafi and his children.

In a related move, Interpol, the international police agency, issued an international "Orange Notice" alert for Gaddafi and 15 members of his inner circle, declaring that they had been "identified as being involved in or complicit in planning attacks, including aerial bombardments, on civilian populations". While there is little doubt that the Libyan regime has mounted murderous attacks on anti-government protesters, the Western authorities have offered no specific evidence to substantiate such charges, which could provide a justification for sending in forces to capture Gaddafi.

Within the US political establishment, pressure is mounting for an intervention. Former Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain and former Democrat vice presidential candidate Senator Joe Lieberman issued a joint statement urging the White House to move faster, "for both moral and strategic reasons."

Speaking at the Brookings Institution in Washington, McCain revealed something of the reactionary calculations motivating US policymakers. He warned that the revolutionary movement seen in Libya, Egypt and elsewhere would continue to spread, "beyond the boundaries of the Arab world" and "throughout the globe."

Inside Libya, Gaddafi's former justice minister, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, who now heads the opposition National Libyan Council in Benghazi, called for foreign air strikes and a no-fly zone. Citing sources within the council, the *New York Times* reported that this stance was adopted at a heated council meeting where "others strongly disagreed". There has been deep opposition to such a call within popular protests against Gaddafi, because of fears of a return to neo-colonial rule—fears that Gaddafi is exploiting to posture as a defender of Libyan sovereignty.

The readiness of the bourgeois opposition leaders in Benghazi, however, to facilitate an intervention by the same powers that have plundered Libya historically is rooted in their own class interests in preventing the development of a wider mass movement from below against the regime.

Jalil's call demonstrates that the opposition council, which includes other recent defectors from Gaddafi's leadership, would be perfectly willing to enter into intimate relations with the Western powers and oil companies—no less than Gaddafi and his cronies, who cemented lucrative ties in Washington, London, Rome and other capitals during the past decade.

London's *Daily Telegraph* has reported that British officials have held talks with former allies of Gaddafi, to identify "potential future leaders". Among them was General Obaidi, a former interior minister and head of Libyan special forces. A Downing Street source told the newspaper that Obaidi was someone Britain "could do business with."

The Gaddafi regime is continuing to attack protesters with brutal force. Yesterday, about 1,000 demonstrators shouting slogans and waving pre-1969 flags in the poor suburb of Tajoura on the outskirts of Tripoli were dispersed after Friday prayers by police firing tear gas and plastic bullets. Other parts of the capital were patrolled by fleets of vehicles packed with soldiers, police and men in plain-clothes armed with AK-47s.

In Zawiyah, 60 kilometres west of Tripoli, residents told Reuters at least 30 people had been killed, including the town's opposition commander, when pro-government forces attempted to retake the town. According to residents, pro-Gaddafi militias opened fire on a peaceful protest in front of the town's hospital, killing seven people and injuring many others.

Despite intensive efforts to prevent media coverage, evidence also emerged of large-scale detentions by the security forces. An Amnesty International spokesman confirmed that it was receiving, and trying to verify, reports of disappearances and rapes in Tripoli.

Sporadic fighting occurred elsewhere, especially in areas surrounding key oil facilities. In the east of the country, opposition forces said they had pushed further west and seized control of Ras Lanuf, an oil terminal which has been under the regime's control and lies along a strategic coastal road between the east and Sirte, Gaddafi's birthplace.

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