US intensifies military operations in Libya

Mike Head
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Officially, the Obama administration and Washington's allies are still drawing up "contingency plans" to intervene in the Libyan crisis. In reality, intensive military and intelligence operations are underway within and around the oil-rich country.

Under the hypocritical banner of stopping "unacceptable violence" against the Libyan people, the US and the European powers are seeking to install a regime in Tripoli that will be even more subordinate to their interests than Muammar Gaddafi's has proven to be over the past decade.

Unlike its response to the revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt—Obama did not once call for the ouster of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali or Hosni Mubarak and is supporting the retention of their regimes headed by new personnel—the US government has openly called for Gaddafi's removal.

Washington is doing so in the name of democracy and humanitarian concerns even as it backs, and continues to arm, anti-democratic regimes across the region, notably in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen, while they use police-state repression and violence to suppress popular uprisings.

The US is intent on working with top-level defectors from the Gaddafi regime, including those in the opposition interim government in Benghazi, to establish a puppet administration in Libya that will not only protect the substantial oil and gas interests of the US and other Western countries, but also provide a staging post for operations against the revolutionary struggles that are continuing in neighbouring countries.

An indication of the scale of the US-led operation was given by Thom Shanker in the *New York Times* on Monday. Citing administration officials, he reported: "The latest military force to draw within striking distance of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, is the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard two amphibious assault ships, the Kearsarge and the Ponce. The unit provides a complete air, sea and land force that can project its power quickly and across hundreds of miles, either from flat-decked ships in the Mediterranean Sea or onto a small beachhead on land.

"In this task force are Harrier jump-jet warplanes, which not only can bomb, strafe and engage in dogfights, but can also carry surveillance pods for monitoring military action on the ground in Libya; attack helicopters; transport aircraft—both cargo helicopters and the fast, long-range Osprey, whose rotors let it lift straight up, then tilt forward like propellers to ferry Marines, doctors, refugees or supplies across the desert—landing craft that can cross the surf anywhere along Libya's long coastline; and about 400 ground combat troops of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines."

In addition, he explained, "ample" US planes were based in Europe to strike "valued government or military targets" in Libya, and the aircraft carrier Enterprise and its strike group were "carefully sailing" up the Red Sea, bound for the Mediterranean. Other options being prepared included inserting Special Operations teams to assist the opposition forces, as was done in both Afghanistan and Iraq before the US-led invasions of 2001 and 2003.

Shanker said the expedition was initially being presented as a humanitarian one, helping to airlift international refugees from Libya, but had an unmistakeable objective. "The flotilla can be seen as a modern-day example of 'gunboat diplomacy'—intended to embolden rebels and shake the confidence of loyalist forces and mercenaries, perhaps even inspiring a palace coup."

Speaking from the Oval Office in the White House yesterday, President Barack Obama delivered his most explicit statement yet about using military force to oust the Gaddafi regime. He declared: "We've got NATO, as we speak, consulting in Brussels around a wide range of potential options, including potential military options, in response to the violence that continues to take place inside of Libya."

Addressing reporters after a meeting with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, he said the two countries "stand shoulder to shoulder" in sending "a very clear message to the Libyan people that we will stand with them." The Australian government had already publicly called for military intervention, via the imposition of a "no-fly zone".

Behind the scenes, US and European military and intelligence operations are proceeding apace, as evidenced by the embarrassing detention of eight members of the UK's Special Air Service (SAS) in Benghazi last Friday, and the earlier capture of Dutch marines by forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime.

Robert Fisk, the *Independent's* veteran Middle East correspondent, yesterday reported that US AWACS surveillance aircraft had been flying around Libya, tracking Libyan planes, including Gaddafi's private jet, for several days. On Sunday night, Al Jazeera television broadcast recordings made by American aircraft to Maltese air traffic control requesting details of Gaddafi's plane. On Monday, NATO announced that the AWACS mission had been extended to 24 hours a day.

Fisk also reported that the US had asked Saudi Arabia to supply arms to the opposition council in Benghazi, starting with anti-tank rockets and mortars, and then ground-to-air missiles to shoot down Libyan fighter-bombers. Fisk noted that "their assistance would allow Washington to disclaim any military involvement in the supply chain—even though the arms would be American and paid for by the Saudis."

The Saudi royal family has a track record in this regard. During

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the 1980s it was involved in the illegal Iran-Contra operation by the Reagan administration to secretly arm rebels in Nicaragua, and it helped the US arm Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration's request to the Saudis is extremely revealing. The White House is working hand-in-glove with its despotic ally—even as the Saudi monarchy bans all demonstrations in advance of planned "day of rage" protests—in order to protect strategic US military, diplomatic and oil interests in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.

Washington has been reluctant to openly intervene militarily in Libya, which could require a full-scale invasion, for fear of triggering a popular backlash across the region and in Libya itself. There is deep hostility to the neo-colonial role of the US, both for its occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and its sponsorship of all the Middle East's repressive regimes, from Egypt to the Gulf emirates.

For that reason, and to attempt to give a fig leaf of legality to its intervention, the Obama administration has asked its European allies to take the lead, publicly at least, via NATO and the European Union. Reports of Libyan military attacks on civilians are being used to justify a more direct military assault, possibly commencing with a no-fly zone, which would require air strikes on Libyan targets.

Yesterday, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said attacks against civilians in Libya may amount to "crimes against humanity," making it difficult for the world to stand "idly by". Shortly afterward, British Foreign Secretary William Hague told the British Parliament there were "credible reports" that Libyan government forces had used helicopter gunships against civilians. Hague said Britain and some other countries were working "on a contingency basis" on a United Nations Security Council resolution allowing for a no-fly zone.

As revealed by the abortive British SAS operation, the European powers are also spearheading efforts to liaise with the Gaddafi defectors who led the formation of a self-proclaimed Libyan National Council in Benghazi last Saturday, declaring itself the sole representative body for all of Libya. Despite the setback of the SAS fiasco—it appears that the Benghazi leadership objected to the too naked involvement of foreign troops—Defence Secretary Liam Fox stated that "a small British diplomatic team" was in Benghazi.

On Sunday, the French government hailed the creation of the national council. Paris "pledges support for the principles that motivate it and the goals it has set itself," French Foreign Ministry spokesperson Bernard Valero said. The next day, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Farttini said Italy—which ruled Libya brutally from 1912 to 1943—had begun discreet talks with the council, boasting that Italy had better contacts in Libya than most countries.

Significantly, one of the first actions of the Benghazi council was to assure the Western powers that it would honour all contracts to supply oil from the east of Libya, where most of the country's oil reserves are concentred. Saad al-Ferjani, the council member managing economic affairs, told Al Arabiya television on Sunday: "We will cover all of our contracts, they cannot be changed."

This statement exemplifies the pro-Western and capitalist character of the embryonic regime, whose leading public figures were mostly all serving in the Gaddafi regime until very recently. They include former justice minister Mustafa Mohamed Abud Al Jeleil, who chairs the council, General Abdul Fattah Younis al Obaidi, the former Libyan interior minister and head of Gaddafi's special forces, Ali Essawi, a former ambassador to India, who heads foreign affairs, and Omar Hariri, another former military officer, who was appointed head of the military.

In another clear statement of the council's orientation, Jeleil said it would like to be recognised by the Western powers. He told Al Jazeera: "There are official contacts with European and Arab [countries]." Worried that Gaddafi would politically exploit the council's collaboration with the US and its allies, Jeleil said it was opposed to any foreign military intervention. However, he has backed the imposition of a no-fly zone.

Because of their leading roles in the Gaddafi regime, these figures have many intimate military, intelligence, financial and diplomatic connections with the US and its allies. Over the past decade, Gaddafi provided intelligence to the West, entered into lucrative deals with global oil companies and invested an estimated $65 billion in Europe and the US, via the Libyan Investment Authority alone.

Yesterday, Gaddafi, while accusing his Benghazi-based opponents of aiding and abetting "foreign interference" and the return of "colonialism" to Libya, issued a thinly-veiled plea for a renewed accommodation with the imperialist powers. He invoked his regime's collaboration in the "war on terrorism" and in preventing African refugees from entering Europe. "Libya plays a vital role in regional peace and world peace. We are an important partner in fighting Al Qaeda," he stated. "There are millions of blacks who could come to the Mediterranean to cross to France and Italy, and Libya plays a role in security in the Mediterranean."

On the ground in Libya, fighting continued yesterday between pro- and anti-Gaddafi forces, with both sides focussing on vital oil-related facilities in the Gulf of Sirte and west of Tripoli. The mainstream media, which is reporting the clashes almost exclusively from the Benghazi side, has begun emphasising the incapacity of the opposition forces to match the firepower of Gaddafi's forces, thereby laying the basis for more open military intervention.

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