

France recognises Libyan opposition leadership

Patrick O'Connor
11 March 2011

The French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday extended official diplomatic recognition to the so-called Libyan Interim Transitional National Council, the first outside government to do so.

According to Agence France Presse, the Sarkozy administration will also recommend to its counterparts at a European Union summit concluding today that Gaddafi's command headquarters be bombed.

These aggressive and unilateral interventions into Libyan affairs comes amid planning in Washington, Brussels and at the UN Security Council on forcing the collapse of the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi faces a challenge from the opposition National Council that was formed last month, after mass protests broke out against Gaddafi's rule in the east of the country.

There is discussion of air strikes, no-fly zones and other military measures aiming to install a client government in Tripoli friendly to transnational oil companies and the strategic interests of the Western powers.

By recognising the National Council, Paris is potentially throwing a lifeline to the organisation, which faces an increasingly difficult situation in fighting inside Libya. Gaddafi's forces have recaptured Zawiyah, an oil port and refinery city 50 kilometres to the west of Tripoli, and also the important oil processing centre of Ras Lanuf on the Gulf of Sirte, in the east of the country.

The government's use of the air force reportedly played an important role in each battle. Warplanes reportedly bombed another oil town, Brega, about 80 kilometres east of Ras Lanuf.

The French government's provocative stance was hailed by the Benghazi-based leadership. Mustafa Gheriani, a media organiser at the opposition headquarters, told the media that the diplomatic recognition is the "first nail in the coffin of Gaddafi." He added: "France is playing the role of breaking the ice for the European Union. We expect all Europe to follow."

French imperialism is aggressively advancing its interests—not least those of its main oil firm, Total—in a region where it

previously had significant colonial possessions.

France's diplomatic recognition paves the way for billions of dollars in oil revenues and frozen Libyan financial assets to be handed over to the self-appointed leadership of the anti-Gaddafi forces based in the eastern city of Benghazi. The extraordinary decision was made despite the fact that the opposition leadership is unelected, its composition remains unclear, and many of its leading members are former Gaddafi government members, including council head Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, the government's former justice minister.

A meeting of European Union foreign ministers imposed further measures against the Libyan government. It added five financial institutions, including the \$70 billion Libyan Investment Authority and the Libyan central bank, to its sanctions list. Discussions will continue today, and will reportedly include a decision to extend the sanctions to Libya's state-owned oil company.

Each of the major European powers is seeking to advance its own imperialist interests in Libya and the Middle East. Britain and France have presented a united demand for the imposition of a no-fly zone, but they are themselves divided on certain issues. British Foreign Minister William Hague appeared to reject suggestions that his government would quickly follow France's recognition of the opposition leadership. "We recognise states rather than groups within states," he pointedly said.

A meeting of NATO defence ministers yesterday agreed to move warships in the Mediterranean Sea closer to Libya, including a German frigate and an Italian cruiser and minesweepers. The ships will increase surveillance of Libya and monitor the arms embargo against the country.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said the vessels would "improve NATO's situational awareness and contribute to our surveillance and monitoring capability, including with regard to the arms embargo". He added that there were three conditions for an intervention: "Firstly, there has to be demonstrable need for NATO action. Secondly, there has to be a clear legal basis. And thirdly, there has to be firm regional support."

The National Council has played a thoroughly reactionary role throughout the anti-Gaddafi uprising. The movement was triggered by workers and young Libyans, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and driven by the same issues as their North African counterparts: social inequality, mass unemployment, limited education opportunities, “free market” reform and privatisation programs, and government repression and corruption.

The National Council represents a section of the Libyan ruling elite that, from the very beginning of the uprising, rushed to hijack and pre-empt the unfolding revolt. For this layer, ousting Gaddafi is a means to promote its own political and economic interests.

The official opposition leadership is just as hostile as the Gaddafi regime towards any challenge to capitalist property relations in Libya.

It has consistently directed its appeals not to the social aspirations of the working class, but to the major powers. Al Jazeera yesterday reported that the “national transitional council, based in Benghazi, says it will respect all oil contracts signed by Libya.” Opposition spokesman Hafiz Ghoga added: “We are seeking to increase our production of oil, but the bombardment of certain oil industry locations will definitely affect our levels of production.”

This statement pointed to the financial and strategic calculations behind any no-fly zone that may be imposed by the US and European powers.

Significant tactical divisions are emerging among the major powers and inside the US government itself on how to effectively intervene in Libya, however.

The UN Security Council deadlocked yesterday over whether to vote for a no-fly zone, with Russia and China opposing any moves towards even tentative military action.

Washington yesterday joined the German government in rejecting, at least for now, British and French moves to have NATO impose a no-fly zone. Defense Secretary Gates said that contingency planning would continue, but “that’s the extent of it as far as a no-fly zone is concerned.” Gates added that the arms embargo on Libya would not be enforced by military force unless this was authorised by the UN Security Council.

Germany’s foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, declared: “One thing for the German government is absolutely clear—we do not want to get sucked into a war in North Africa.” Westerwelle added that Sarkozy’s diplomatic recognition of the Benghazi leadership appeared to have been decided “on a whim.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday told the House Appropriations Committee that she would speak with the Libyan opposition leadership when she visited Tunisia and Egypt next week. But, the *New York Times* noted, Clinton “appeared far more

cautious about military intervention than she was a week ago, aligning herself more closely with the warnings offered by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.”

“Absent international authorisation, the United States acting alone would be stepping into a situation whose consequences are unforeseeable,” the secretary of state declared. Clinton warned that no-fly zones and air strikes may not advance the US regime-change drive in Libya, saying the no-fly zone imposed over Iraq in the 1990s “did not prevent Saddam Hussein from slaughtering people on the ground and it did not get him out of office.”

Whether the US military, already fighting two neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is capable of this action is another question. Within the senior command there is clearly disquiet over the implications of war with Libya, especially as Gaddafi appears to be gaining the upper hand on the ground.

US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Congress that in the longer term “the regime will prevail” because of its superior firepower. Clapper added that Libyan air defences are “quite substantial”, second only to Egypt among Arab countries.

During the Armed Services Committee hearing, Army Lt. Gen. Ronald Burgess, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, agreed with Clapper. “Right now he [Gaddafi] seems to have staying power, unless some other dynamic changes at this time,” he said, adding that momentum “has started to shift” to the regime’s forces. Burgess also acknowledged that imposing a no-fly zone “would be considered an act of war.”

Some White House officials appeared to challenge these assessments, however. Obama’s National Security Advisor Tom Donilon told journalists that Clapper had provided a “static assessment” of the situation. “But if you look at it through a ‘dynamic lens’, taking into account motivation, isolation, Gaddafi’s loss of legitimacy ... you can come up with a different assessment,” Donilon declared.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact