

Washington seeks NATO cover for protracted war against Libya

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The Obama administration is formally shifting its war in Libya to NATO command as the US-dominated alliance predicts the fighting will go on for at least another three months.

The agreement to place the US-led war under NATO cover emerged piecemeal amid acrimonious discussions between Washington and its NATO allies, each of which is pursuing its own strategic interests in waging an imperialist war against a former colonial country.

After a 24-hour period ending Friday morning in which US warships fired another 16 Tomahawk missiles at Libyan targets and “coalition” warplanes, the majority of them American, flew another 153 sorties, NATO officials in Brussels revealed that planning for the Libyan intervention assumed that it would last for another three months, with the option of extending this period as required.

The head of the French armed forces also cautioned against any expectation of a quick end to the attacks. “I doubt that it will be days,” Admiral Edouard Guillaud told French Info radio. “I think it will be weeks. I hope it will not take months.”

Libya, meanwhile, has reported that the civilian death toll from the US-NATO bombing and missile strikes has risen to around 100. In Tripoli, hospital workers and government officials said that the latest attacks on the Libyan capital had killed a number of civilians, including women.

The Al-Arabiya television network cited an unnamed source Friday as confirming that among the casualties from the air strikes was Gaddafi’s son Khamis, said to have been killed in a raid on the Bab al-Azizia compound in Tripoli.

The US and NATO warplanes have been used overwhelmingly in recent days to attack ground forces loyal to the government of Muammar Gaddafi and to destroy the country’s infrastructure. The aim of this campaign is to provide sufficient fire power from the air to allow an offensive by the so-called “rebels” based in Benghazi with the aim of toppling Gaddafi and installing a new regime more pliant to Western governments and the major Western oil companies.

The “rebels” however, have given no indication that they are up to this task, and there are reports that other measures are being readied should they fail to dislodge government loyalists from the contested cities of Ajdabiya in the east and Misurata in the west and prove incapable of marching on Tripoli.

According to Russia’s RIA Novosti news service, Russia’s intelligence service has learned that preparations are under way for US-NATO ground operations in Libya beginning in late April or early May.

“Information coming via different channels shows that NATO countries, with the active participation of Britain and the United States, are developing a plan for a ground operation on Libyan

territory,” the news agency quoted an unnamed source within Russian intelligence as saying.

“From all indications, a ground operation will be launched if the alliance fails to force the Gaddafi regime to capitulate with air strikes and missile attacks,” he added, saying that the operation could start “in late April-early May.”

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 pushed through by Washington on March 17 imposed a no-fly zone over Libya, while allowing “all necessary measures,” ostensibly to protect civilians. It specifically ruled out “a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory.”

Increasingly, however, Western military analysts are making the case that the ban on any occupation force does not preclude a more temporary deployment of troops and, as the *Wall Street Journal* put it Friday, “The history of air-only military actions is that they rarely, if ever, defeat an adversary without ‘boots on the ground’.”

Reports from Libya on the disarray within the ranks of the armed opposition to Gaddafi based in Benghazi point to the likelihood that such an intervention will prove necessary to accomplish the aim of “regime change,” unless Washington and its allies are able to provoke some kind of coup within the existing regime itself.

One of the most vivid and thorough accounts of the state of the so-called rebels was provided Thursday by Nancy Youssef of McClatchy Newspapers.

“Rebel fighters who once vowed to seize Tripoli from Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi instead have retreated from their forward positions to defend their homes, saying their rebel council isn’t leading them, they don’t trust their military commanders and their army is divided,” she reported.

She said that earlier pretensions that the armed opposition would march on Tripoli had been “dashed by the ease with which Gadhafi forces entered this city [Benghazi] a week ago.”

“Perhaps most unnerving was the discovery that hundreds, if not thousands, of Gadhafi sympathizers were among them,” the report added. “During the loyalist attack, rebels here say, men in civilian clothes came out of their Benghazi homes and attacked the city along with Gadhafi forces charging in from the south.”

She quoted Benghazi residents describing the National Council in Benghazi, which recently proclaimed itself an “interim government” as “useless,” and one who predicted that the city itself could erupt into a civil war.

Confusion persisted into Friday as to the precise nature of the agreement under which NATO would ostensibly assume control of combat operations in Libya. Initially it was reported that the US-led alliance would take responsibility for enforcing the no-fly zone,

which, given the destruction of Libya's air force and most of its air defense capabilities, faces no significant challenge.

This would leave the US military directly in charge of the only real combat action, which is the bombing and missile raids being carried out by US-NATO warplanes against ground troops loyal to the Libyan government.

On Friday afternoon, however, it was reported that a deal had been struck in which NATO would formally assume command of all Libyan operations, immediately taking responsibility for the no-fly zone, with details as to planning for the air strikes aimed at destroying pro-Gaddafi ground forces and supporting the anti-government insurgency to be worked out in a document to be presented to NATO member countries within the next few days.

The deal was the result of four days of bitter debates within NATO ending in a round of telephone conference calls Thursday night between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, French Foreign Minister Alan Juppé, British Foreign Secretary William Hague and Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister.

The talks had been marked by particularly hostile exchanges between Turkey and France. The Turkish government, already antagonistic toward President Nicolas Sarkozy over his adamant opposition to Turkey's membership in the European Union, was excluded from a hastily convened summit called in Paris after the approval of the UN resolution.

France, which jumped the gun on the military intervention, launching the first air strikes, reportedly without coordinating them with its allies, had earlier insisted that the intervention should be directed by an ad-hoc body independent of NATO, ostensibly because of the negligible Arab participation.

Turkey accused the French government of seeking to assert its leadership of the intervention to further its own aims of laying claim to Libya's oil resources. The Turkish government's position was reflected in the report of the pro-government daily *Zaman*, which stated:

"Turkish leaders have publicly criticized France for 'turning the operation into a show of force' and questioned French motives in the operation, voicing suspicion that some partners seeking to act outside NATO have their eyes on Libya's mineral wealth. The Turkish government thus now demands that planning regarding any military action should be done within NATO, strictly in line with objectives set out in the UN decision."

Turkey has its own extensive business interests in Libya and elsewhere in the region and has no intention of ceding them to France. It has offered several warships to enforce the blockade of Libya's coast, but has insisted that it will not participate in any armed action against the Libyan people.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan Friday expressed satisfaction over the decision to place military operations under NATO command, declaring, "Paris has started to be sidelined. I found this pretty positive especially for the current process in Libya."

Stratfor, a security consultancy firm with close ties to US intelligence, pointed to other fissures within the so-called "coalition" attacking Libya. It noted that Italy "has even suggested that if some consensus is not found regarding NATO's involvement it would withdraw its offer of air bases so that 'someone else's actions did not rebound on us,' according to Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini. Rome is concerned that the Franco-British alliance is going to either reduce Italy's interests in a post-Gaddafi Libya or fail to finish the operation, leaving Italy to deal with chaos a few hundred miles across

the Mediterranean."

As Stratfor points out, all of these European powers—not to mention the US—had embraced Gaddafi and concluded multi-billion-dollar oil and arms deals with his regime before concluding that he had to be overthrown for "humanitarian" reasons.

Pointing to divisions between Britain and France on the Libyan intervention, Stratfor commented: "Paris' and London's interests in waging war on Libya are not the same, and Libya carries different weight with each. For the United Kingdom, Libya offers a promise of energy exploitation. It is not a country with which London has a strong client-patron relationship at the moment, but one could develop if Moammar Gadhafi were removed from power. For France, Tripoli already is a significant energy exporter and arms customer. Paris' interest in intervening is also about intra-European politics."

Within the political establishment and the military-intelligence complex, there is no confusion about the real motives for the Libyan intervention. It has nothing to do with "saving the people" or "humanitarianism," but is all about oil, profits and strategic interests. Within this process, NATO has emerged as an instrument for restraining the sharp inter-imperialist conflicts being generated by the new scramble for Africa.

The role to be played by NATO in relation to the US military in Libya is comparable to the one it now plays in Afghanistan. The claims by Obama and Hillary Clinton that the US is "stepping back" notwithstanding, US commanders have made it clear that American forces will still continue playing the leading role in attacking Libya, while NATO itself is commanded by US Admiral James Stavridis.

Washington's motives for presenting the war against Libya as being led by NATO and supported by Arab countries, with US forces purportedly playing only a "supporting role," are two-fold. On the one hand, with 100,000 US troops carrying out a war to suppress the resistance of the Afghan people to foreign occupation, an escalating air war in neighboring Pakistan and another 50,000 troops still occupying Iraq, the Obama administration is anxious to camouflage the reality that US imperialism is carrying out yet another war against a Muslim country.

On the other hand, the administration is concerned about inevitable popular opposition within the US itself, where recent polls indicate that two-thirds believe the Afghanistan war is not worth fighting. After a week of US military actions in Libya, Obama has yet to deliver a speech to the American people justifying this new war. Nor has he sought any vote in Congress authorizing the action, in flagrant violation of the US Constitution. In that context, the Democratic administration has gone even further than the Bush White House in arrogating to itself the power to carry out military interventions based on the sole say-so of the "commander-in-chief."



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