

The debate on “arming the rebels”

Washington prepares to escalate the war in Libya

Bill Van Auken
31 March 2011

The ongoing public debate in Washington and the American media on “arming the rebels” in Libya points to a dramatic escalation of the US-led war.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, followed by their British counterparts, Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague, have spoken in almost identical terms over the past two days, insisting in response to questions about arming the anti-Gaddafi forces that they were “not ruling it out.”

The debate has intensified in the face of a growing debacle for the US-led intervention. Armed anti-Gaddafi forces have carried out a headlong retreat after confronting resistance from both military forces loyal to the government in Tripoli and armed civilians hostile to the US-backed opposition. According to reports from Libya, they have been pushed back to the strategic highway junction town of Ajdabiya, the site of some of the heaviest US-NATO bombing.

The earlier advance of some 200 miles along the Mediterranean coast, which was celebrated by Western governments and media, was due entirely to air strikes carried out by US and NATO warplanes, which effectively acted as the air force of the so-called “rebels.”

Forces supporting the Gaddafi regime beat a tactical retreat rather than be wiped out from the air. After a week of bombing and missile attacks, last weekend the Pentagon sent in low-flying, heavily armed AC-130 gunships and A10 attack planes, aircraft that have been used to deadly effect in close-air support for US troops from the Vietnam War to the Fallujah massacre in Iraq and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

The “rebel” advance essentially amounted to a drive-through, with the US-backed fighters encountering no opposition. “There wasn’t resistance,” Faraj Sheydani, one of the anti-Gaddafi fighters told the *New York Times*. “There was no one in front of us. There’s no fighting.”

This changed on Tuesday, when the US-backed insurgents approached the town of Sirte, Gaddafi’s birthplace. In the village of Bin Jawad, about 80 miles east of Sirte, according to a report by McClatchy Newspapers reporter Nancy Youssef, women were sent out on buses. “As soon as the women were out of harm’s way,” the article said, “the men began shooting at the rebels from their houses.”

On Wednesday, the rout continued, with the oil-producing towns of Ras Lanuf and Brega falling back under government control and the US-backed forces fleeing back to Ajdabiya. As Youssef reported, “Most [of the ‘rebels’] it turned out had no intention of fighting when it mattered.”

In an attempt to overcome the severe limitations of this force,

Washington has already sent in operatives tasked with organizing the “rebels” into an armed unit capable of waging civil war. As the *New York Times* reported on Wednesday, the Central Intelligence Agency has deployed “clandestine operatives into Libya to gather intelligence for military airstrikes and make contacts with rebels.”

In addition, the *Times* reported, citing British officials, “dozens of British special forces and MI6 intelligence officers are working inside Libya.”

ABC News, meanwhile, reported that President Obama Wednesday signed a secret presidential finding “authorizing covert operations to aid the effort in Libya.”

“The presidential finding discusses a number of ways to help the opposition to Muammar Gaddafi, authorizing some assistance now and setting up a legal framework for more robust activities in the future,” the network reports.

It is in this context that the drumbeat for “arming the rebels” has begun. The phrase is meant to conceal the fact that any attempt to provide significant weaponry to the disorganized forces based in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi would entail the deployment of US “trainers,” “advisors” and special forces units, making a mockery of the pledge made Monday night by Obama that he would “not put ground troops into Libya.”

As the *Times* reported, citing unnamed administration officials, “supplying arms would further entangle the United States in a drawn-out civil war, because the rebels would need to be trained to use any weapons, even relatively simple rifles and shoulder-fired anti-armor weapons.”

The proposal to provide arms, it adds, “carries echoes of previous American efforts to arm rebels, in Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and elsewhere, many of which backfired.”

All of the examples given by the *Times* were counterrevolutionary operations mounted by the CIA. In Angola, the agency poured in arms, money, advisors and South African troops to back the UNITA movement of Jonas Savimbi, fueling a civil war that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands.

In Nicaragua, the CIA directed the infamous contra mercenaries in a terror war against the population, killing more than 40,000 people, mostly civilians. And in Afghanistan, the CIA armed and funded the Islamist mujahideen against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in a war that left more than a million Afghans dead.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the armed conflict in Libya is not a “revolution,” a “pro-democracy movement” or a “humanitarian” intervention, but rather a similar operation run by the

CIA and allied intelligence agencies. Its aim is not to liberate the Libyan people, but rather to install a more pliant regime in Tripoli that will guarantee US control of oil production in that country and the wider region.

The discussion on arming the anti-Gaddafi forces is dominated by the same lies and duplicity that have characterized the US intervention from its outset.

Officially, NATO is not contemplating such action. NATO's secretary general, the right-wing Danish politician Anders Fogh Rasmussen, insisted in an interview with CNN: "The UN mandate authorizes the enforcement of an arms embargo. We are not in Libya to arm people, but to protect people."

Rasmussen's statement is meant to placate a number of NATO members, including Turkey, Germany and Italy, which have publicly opposed any move to arm the forces in Benghazi and voiced reservations about the extent of the US-led bombing campaign. The Obama administration has formally transferred command of the Libyan operation to NATO, which the US dominates politically and militarily, creating a similar structure to the one that exists in Afghanistan.

US and British officials have taken the opposite position, insisting that the March 17 UN resolution authorizing "all necessary means" to protect civilians somehow abrogates a February 26 resolution barring the introduction of all arms and munitions into Libya.

"It is our interpretation that [UN Security Council Resolution] 1973 amended or overrode the absolute prohibition on arms to anyone in Libya, so that there could be a legitimate transfer of arms if a country should choose to do that," Clinton said Tuesday.

British Prime Minister Cameron stuck to the same script in parliament Wednesday, declaring, "Our view is that this [UN resolution] would not necessarily rule out the provision of assistance to those protecting civilians in certain circumstances."

Speaking in a House of Commons debate on March 18—the day after the UN Security Council approved the resolution authorizing a no-fly zone—Cameron took the opposite position, declaring, "The resolution helps to enforce the arms embargo, and our legal understanding is that that arms embargo applies to the whole of Libya."

Legal experts interviewed by the British *Guardian* made it clear that any other interpretation of the UN resolutions could be based only on willful deception. They point out that the March 17 resolution calls for the "strict implementation" of the arms embargo approved in February and that the February resolution demands that any breaching of the ban on arms and munitions receive prior approval from a UN committee established to enforce the measure—and not be carried out unilaterally by one or another government.

If the US moves ahead with arming the anti-Gaddafi forces, it will be defying the United Nations in order to conduct an illegal war no less openly than Bush did in invading Iraq.

One of the persistent questions arising in response to the proposals for arming the "rebels" is what precise role is played in their operations by Al Qaeda and other Islamist forces.

US Adm. James Stavridis, NATO's supreme allied commander for Europe, testifying at a US Senate hearing Tuesday allowed that US intelligence agencies had detected "flickers" of an Al Qaeda presence within the Libyan armed opposition.

"We have seen flickers in the intelligence of potential Al Qaeda, Hezbollah; we've seen different things," said the admiral. "But at this point, I don't have the detail sufficient to say that there's a significant Al Qaeda presence or any other terrorist presence in and among these

folks."

Hillary Clinton brushed off a similar question, declaring, "We don't know as much as we would like to know" about the "rebels."

The US ambassador to Libya, Gene Cretz, admitted to the *New York Times* that he had no way of knowing whether the "rebels" were "100 percent kosher, so to speak." And former CIA agent Bruce Riedel, now an analyst at the Democratic Party-oriented think tank, the Brookings Institution, allowed that there were bound to be such elements. He said, "The question we can't answer is: Are they 2 percent of the opposition? Are they 20 percent? Or are they 80 percent?"

US intelligence analysts have acknowledged that members of the Libya Islamic Fighting Group are playing a role in the attempt to oust Gaddafi. The organization was founded by Libyan veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan and was placed on a list of groups affiliated with the Taliban after September 11.

Newsweek's Afghanistan and Pakistan correspondents Ron Moreau and Sami Yousafzai reported Wednesday that "some of the 200 or so Libyans operating near the Afghan border may be on their way home to steer the anti-Gaddafi revolution in a more Islamist direction." Among them, the report said, is Abu Yahya al-Libi, who is Al Qaeda's "senior Islamist ideologue and bin Laden's head of operations for Afghanistan." If Yahya is successful in reaching eastern Libya, it added, "he'll be able to operate with relative freedom, without worrying about Gaddafi's secret police."

If the Libyan intervention has demonstrated anything, it is the fraud of Washington's so-called global war on terrorism. In its bid to oust Gaddafi and install a US puppet state in Libya, the CIA and the Pentagon are allied with Al Qaeda against a regime which had placed its secret service at the disposal of the CIA for combating the Islamist movement.

Gaddafi has opportunistically attempted to dissuade the US and other Western powers from attacking him by pointing to the role of the Islamists among the rebels, but to no avail.

The CIA's ties to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda precede those forged with the Libyan dictator. It has long seen the terrorist movement as a useful tool, first for attacking the Soviets, then for providing a pretext for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now as foot soldiers in Washington's bid to re-colonize an oil-rich North African country.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact