

Britain steps up campaign for regime change, targeted assassination in Libya

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On Tuesday, London is hosting an international conference to establish a “contact group” of those countries involved in operations against Libya, plus representatives from the African Union and Arab League.

British government sources have stressed that the meeting will concentrate on political, rather than military, objectives in a move reportedly intended to “allay the concerns among Arab and other countries” that NATO is to take control of operations in Libya. Foreign Secretary William Hague said the conference will concentrate on the “humanitarian needs of the Libya people.”

Such professions of concern for the Libyan masses are no less bogus than earlier claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Since 2004, the British bourgeoisie has assiduously sought to cultivate relations with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and his regime. In the wake of the popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, it has determined that the defence and extension of its geopolitical interests in a region possessing vital oil and gas reserves are best served by direct military intervention.

To this end, in the lead-up to the conference, the ruling elite and its media are conducting an offensive to sanction “regime change” in Libya. At the same time, they are making it clear that this is a precursor to broader neo-imperialist interventions in Africa and the Middle East.

Ever since the United Nations sanctioned the imposition of no-fly zones on March 17 under Resolution 1973, British government ministers have sought the widest possible interpretation of it.

Hague refused to rule out whether Gaddafi himself was a military target, stating “that depends on the circumstances at the time”. Defence Secretary Liam Fox was more explicit, saying that Gaddafi was a “legitimate target”.

Such claims were initially disavowed by sections of the military on the grounds that talk of targeted assassination was in breach of international law. Chief of Defence staff General Sir David Richards said talk of attacks on Gaddafi were “not allowed under the UN resolution and it’s not something I want to discuss any further”.

Prime Minister David Cameron had told MPs that the UN resolution was “limited in its scope and explicitly does not provide legal authority for action to bring about Gaddafi’s

removal by military means.”

However, he continued, “Our view is clear that there is no decent future for Libya with Colonel Gaddafi remaining in power.”

Following the massive endorsement of war by Parliament—by 557 to 15—and the decision for NATO to take over operations, calls for regime change have become ever more strident.

Addressing last week’s European Summit in Brussels, Cameron called for Libya’s military and political chiefs to overthrow Gaddafi. “Don’t obey his orders, walk away from your tanks, leave the command and control that you are doing, give up on this regime”, he said, warning, “Every day you work for him you are at risk of the International Criminal Court, and you are at risk of being found guilty of war crimes.”

Hague told parliament that the government was consolidating its relations with the Libyan opposition—organised within the Transitional National Council based in Benghazi—many of whose leaders were formerly high up in the Gaddafi regime. The opposition must “begin to organise a transition” of power, Hague said.

The actions of British, French and US forces inside Libya have made clear that this “transition”—far from being the result of a broader political and democratic process—is to be achieved through Western firepower. Hundreds of sorties have been flown and more than 180 cruise missiles have been fired by coalition forces. Their targets are not only Libyan aircraft and bases, but all military installations and personnel as the Western powers intervene directly into a civil war.

Addressing a conference organised by the *Times* newspaper on Africa last Tuesday, Hague said that it was not for the West “to choose the government of Libya—that is for the Libyan people themselves”. “But”, he said, referring to the international air strikes, the people “have a far greater chance of making that choice” now that the West had intervened militarily to prevent the defeat of the opposition.

In what is considered a major turning point in the civil war, on Friday opposition forces were able to regain the town of Ajdabiya, south of Benghazi, after international air strikes—including bombings by RAF Tornado GR4s—destroyed Libyan tanks in the area. Ajdabiya is regarded as a gateway to the Sirte Gulf Basin, home to 80 percent of Libya’s oil reserves

and significant gas fields. Subsequently the opposition forces have been able to move up the coastline, taking control of strategic oil towns and ports, and thus of Libya's oil exports.

On March 19, the Transitional National Council announced it had established a new "Libyan Oil Company" to take over the supervision of oil production in the country and had appointed its interim director general. It had also "designated the Central Bank of Benghazi as a monetary authority competent in monetary policies in Libya and the appointment of a governor to the Central Bank of Libya, with a temporary headquarters in Benghazi," the statement read. This followed the UN's freeze on the foreign assets of Libya's National Oil Corp. and the Central Bank of Libya.

According to Sky News, the US "is looking at a legal framework to allow limited supplies of arms to the rebels", that would allow it to circumvent the ban on arm supplies to Libya. A spokesperson for US Ambassador Susan Rice confirmed this was the case, arguing that UN resolutions "neither specify nor preclude such an action."

Britain and France are said to be considering similar moves.

The British government has also published a summary of the legal advice it had commissioned on the military action against Libya. The move is intended to distance the Libyan intervention from the charges of illegality that accompanied the previous Labour government's attack on Iraq, exactly eight years to the day in 2003.

In the summary, Dominic Grieve QC said that UN resolution 1973 provided "clear and unequivocal" legal grounds for the deployment of UK military forces.

Specifically, it "authorises member states to take all the necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya," Grieve stated.

No mention is made as to whether Gaddafi can be considered a legitimate target. But Philippe Sands, professor of law at University College London, told the *Guardian*, "The authorisation of 'all necessary measures' is broad and appears to allow the targeting of Gaddafi and others who act to put civilians 'under threat of attack', words that go beyond the need to establish a connection with actual attacks."

Ryszard Piotrowicz, professor of international law at Aberystwyth University, told the newspaper, "Targeted attacks on senior Libyan officials might be justified if this is the only way to stop attacks on civilians. That would include an attack on Colonel Gaddafi himself. The government is acting prudently in not clarifying this now because to do so might limit its freedom of action later, or reveal just how far it is prepared to go."

Dominic Raab, Conservative MP, who led a team at the British Embassy seeking to bring prosecutions of war criminals at The Hague, argued in his blog that "if the removal of Gaddafi is necessary" to protect civilians, then the UN resolution would permit targeting Gaddafi. Raab also pointed

out that the resolution allows targeting "objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage."

It is beyond doubt that Gaddafi is "actually making military decisions with operational consequences," Raab stated. "If Gaddafi chooses to surrender, he should be detained with due process," he said. "But, as long as he retains 'command responsibility', he is a legitimate military target."

Tory Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke has argued that Gaddafi posed a significant threat to Britain's national security if he remained in power.

"We do have one particular interest in the Maghreb [the western region of North Africa], which is Lockerbie", Clarke said, referring to the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 that killed 270 people. "The British people have reason to remember the curse of Gaddafi—Gaddafi back in power, the old Gaddafi looking for revenge, we have a real interest in preventing that."

Clarke went on to claim that the UN resolution on Libya "represented a significant event in the evolution of the world order."

"What we seem to have almost established in the international law is the humanitarian basis which can, in exceptional cases, justify intervention by the international community," he said.

In his remarks to the *Times* conference, Hague invoked the military action against Libya, "authorised by the United Nations Security Council" as a warning to "others who stand in the way of a brighter future for their countries"—singling out Laurent Gbagbo, the contested president of the Ivory Coast and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy was more explicit. He told the European Summit that there was now a new post-UNSC 1973 model of "world governance", based on the "responsibility to protect."

In addition to naming Ivory Coast as next for a UN vote on intervention, Sarkozy pointedly referenced Syria, where the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has bloodily repressed protests.

"Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on each time be the same", Sarkozy said.



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