

Obama makes clear US opposition to ceasefire, insists on regime change in Libya

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US President Barack Obama's rejection of Muammar Gaddafi's plea for a ceasefire again underscores that NATO's intervention into Libya's civil war has nothing to do with protecting civilians. As with Iraq and Afghanistan, its objective is regime change, so as to ensure the untrammelled domination of the Western powers over the country's oil and gas reserves.

In a three-page letter to Obama, Gaddafi beseeched the US president to stop the "unjust war against the small people of a developing country."

Praising Obama as a man of "courage," and wishing him victory in the 2012 elections, the Libyan dictator ends with a pathetic personal appeal: "Despite all this, you will always remain our son whatever happened."

The letter appears to have been motivated by the US decision earlier this week to withdraw from participation in the air bombardment of Gaddafi's forces to a more "supportive" capacity. This has been presented by some in the US media, largely for domestic considerations, as an indication that the White House wanted to distance itself from yet another war in the region.

But if the Gaddafi regime was taken in by such propaganda, it was quickly disabused. The appeal was immediately slapped down by the Obama administration. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Gaddafi "knows what he must do"—making clear that nothing less than "his departure from power and...his departure from Libya" would suffice.

The rebuttal came as Washington, London and Paris stepped up diplomatic and military efforts to strengthen the opposition and achieve Gaddafi's removal by one means or another.

US envoy Chris Stevens, formerly deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Tripoli, is in Benghazi meeting with members of the Transitional National Council (TNC), intended as Libya's government-in-waiting.

US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Stevens was "on the ground...trying to assess the situation."

His assessment would include what kind of "practical, non-lethal assistance" the US might provide the opposition. Asked whether this could involve direct US or international funding to the TNC, Toner said the White House was looking at a "range of possibilities."

Currently just four countries—France, Italy, Qatar and Kuwait—have officially recognised the TNC as the de facto administration of Libya, although a host of diplomats from numerous countries and organisations are currently in Benghazi.

TNC member Hafiz Abdel Goga welcomed Stevens's visit, saying that the body hoped it would be the prelude to Washington's own publicly stated backing for the council.

The *Christian Science Monitor* drew attention to increasing demands by some US "regional experts" that Washington "undertake a more active, if behind-the-scenes, role."

It cited commentary by Anthony Cordesman, national security expert at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies, warning of the dangers of an "unstable stalemate" in Libya's civil war, and urging a "quietly escalating regime kill" as the best option. This would include increased airstrikes—using special forces on the ground to guide them—tightening United Nations sanctions and arming the opposition.

Such steps may already have been approved covertly by Obama, the article added, noting last week's confirmation that CIA operatives were on the ground in Libya providing intelligence on the opposition and helping the airstrikes.

"The intel on the rebels—who they are and to what degree, if any, they are infiltrated by elements of Al Qaeda—will form the basis for Obama's next important decision concerning Libya: whether or not to arm the rebels, either directly or through third parties," it said.

US concern over the extent of Al Qaeda's involvement in the opposition has been a primary factor in its refusal so far to openly endorse the TNC. US Admiral James Stavridis has said that "flickers" of Al Qaeda were detectable in the opposition.

This appears to be the motivation for a flurry of activity by Britain in particular, aimed at distancing the Benghazi opposition from such accusations. The UK's Foreign Office was behind the "unequivocal apology" issued by TNC chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil earlier this week for the 1998 Pan Am passenger plane bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland and Libyan assistance to the Irish Republican Army.

London set up talks between Jalil and Jason McCue, the British lawyer who heads the Libya Victims Initiative, to this end. In addition to an apology, McCue was also seeking \$10 million compensation for each person killed in attacks by the IRA.

When reports first surfaced that Jalil had agreed to these demands, there were angry denials by other members of the TNC, who stated that the "Libyan people" could not be held accountable for such acts and should not apologise for Gaddafi. TNC spokesman Essam Gheriani said, "The whole world knows the Libyan people are not responsible for Gaddafi's acts over 40

years. An apology is not warranted for the simple reason that the Libyan people did not participate in these acts.”

But Gheriani said such statements were necessary because of “the situation in the international arena.”

At the moment, this arena was “more important than the military front,” he said, referring to the TNC’s need for funds—above all access to Libyan assets frozen by the UN Security Council. “They will be frozen until they have a legitimate body they can be released to, so we need recognition,” he said. “This is essential for us.”

The *Guardian* notes that “Britain is holding about £100m in Libyan currency seized from a ship that could be released to the rebel administration...” British Prime Minister David Cameron revealed last month that Britain has frozen a total of £12 billion pounds (\$19.2 billion) of Libyan assets.

The US has frozen upwards of \$30 billion in Libyan assets.

Separately, there has been much speculation about last week’s defection of Moussa Koussa, the former head of Libyan intelligence, to the UK. Koussa’s flight to Britain was said to have been engineered by British intelligence. Foreign Secretary William Hague denied that the government had offered him immunity from prosecution, but Koussa has not been seen in public since his arrival and is reportedly being questioned by security services at a safe house in Surrey.

At the weekend, the *Sunday Express* claimed that Koussa had functioned as a double agent for MI6 and the CIA for over a decade. He had met the heads of MI6 and the CIA in London in 2001, immediately following the 9/11 attacks, where he had handed over information on Al Qaeda and agreed “that a British agent could operate in Tripoli,” it said.

Former Labour foreign secretary, Jack Straw, confirmed that Koussa was a “key contact” for the UK, instrumental in the 2003 negotiations for Gaddafi to abandon his weapons programme. This had been vital for Gaddafi to avoid “the regime change that had just befallen Saddam Hussein,” the *Guardian* reported.

Secret talks were held in 2003 at the Travellers Club in Pall Mall in London, the newspaper said, “Britain’s chief interlocutor at the talks was Sir Mark Allen, a veteran Arabist who was deputy head of MI6. Steve Kappes, now deputy director of the CIA, was part of the circle of trust too.”

Allen went on to join BP as a special adviser, “helping the company to win huge oil contracts with Gaddafi.”

Whatever the truth about Koussa, as the *Daily Telegraph* noted, the outcome of the disarmament talks had subsequently proved “very much to Britain’s advantage, particularly now that RAF jets are playing a lead role in the attempts to impose a no-fly zone over Libyan air space.”

An additional four UK Typhoon jets have now joined the 16 RAF ground-attack aircraft involved in NATO operations, after the US withdrew from direct participation in the air operation and opposition forces demanded NATO step up its bombardment of Gaddafi’s army. NATO in fact flew its greatest number of missions—198—on Wednesday. The large number of sorties appears to have been responsible for three incidents of “friendly fire.” On Thursday, at least 13 opposition fighters were killed by a mistaken NATO strike on their tank positions.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé has said that concern for civilian casualties in cities such as opposition-held Misrata was preventing air bombardment of urban areas. But this is being used to justify moves to provide further military assistance to the opposition, which is currently considered too small, disorganised and untrained to defeat Gaddafi militarily on the ground.

Closed-door talks between Clinton and Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini in Washington Wednesday focused on arming the opposition. Washington and London have argued this would be in line with UN resolutions. Britain’s Ministry of Defence said that it had not yet “decided to arm or train the opposition forces,” although UN resolution 1973 “does not necessarily rule out the provision of assistance in certain circumstances.”

Clinton told last month’s London conference that the resolution “amended or overrode the absolute prohibition of arms to anyone in Libya so that there could be legitimate transfer of arms if a country were to choose to do that,” although she added, “We have not made that decision at this time.”

As to Cordesman’s other proposals, the Western powers are openly discussing bringing in private security firms and special forces to bolster the opposition. The model is Western assistance for the Northern Alliance’s toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001.

According to reports, NATO is to request that Arab countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, finance the hiring of mercenaries to supplement the opposition army. It has also been suggested that Jordan help train the opposition into an effective military force.

The *Telegraph* reported that “for operations where the British Government is not officially involved, Special Forces personnel are often allowed to temporarily resign or take leave in order to fight for others.”



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