

Obama sends drones to Libya as Britain readies troops

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The Obama administration has joined Britain and France in a major escalation of the war against Libya that entails the deployment of US drones, intensified bombing and the preparation of an invasion force.

President Barack Obama, together with his British and French counterparts, Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, issued an open letter last week spelling out that their joint military campaign against the country would continue until it achieved the toppling of Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi and that any other outcome than regime change would represent an “unconscionable betrayal.”

It is in this context that Obama’s order to use pilotless warplanes over Libya assumes ominous implications.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. James Cartwright, announced the deployment of the Predator drones at a Pentagon press conference Thursday afternoon.

“What they will bring that is unique to the conflict is their ability to get down lower, therefore to be able to get better visibility on ... targets now that they have started to dig themselves into defensive positions,” Cartwright said.

Cartwright revealed that US drones had already been flying over Libya, but had not been armed with their Hellfire missiles, being used instead for gathering intelligence.

Gates stressed that the use of the drones would not represent a major escalation of US involvement in the Libya intervention. “This is a very limited additional role on our part but it does provide some additional capabilities to NATO,” said the defense secretary.

He further revealed that the first armed mission of the drones had been scheduled that day, but had been cancelled because of bad weather. Once again, without any discussion, much less congressional debate, the administration is dragging the American people deeper into a war of aggression.

The “unique” and “additional capabilities” that Washington is introducing into the Libyan intervention is the ability to carry out targeted assassinations.

This was spelled out Thursday by the *Washington Post*’s foreign affairs columnist David Ignatius.

“Armed with Hellfire missiles, the Predator drone is a tool for assassination from 10,000 feet,” he wrote. “It has been used by

the CIA, with a paper-thin veneer of deniability, to attack al-Qaeda operatives and related targets in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where other weapons do not reach.”

Ignatius continued: “They did not state what targets the Predator had been assigned to strike. But surely it’s likely that the goal was to kill Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi or other members of his inner circle.”

The *Washington Post* columnist is among the most well-connected members of the Washington press corps and undoubtedly does not make this statement without having confirmed such plans with sources within the administration or the US military and intelligence apparatus.

There has been an ongoing debate within the political establishment and the media over the prospect of assassinating Gaddafi since the intervention was first launched little more than a month ago.

In Britain, the issue became the subject of a public disagreement between the Cameron government, whose defense minister, Liam Fox, said that assassination of the Libyan leader was a possibility, and the British military, which insisted that it was not.

In his first briefing of congressional leaders on the war—conducted March 25, nearly a week after the attack on Libya was launched—Obama raised the question. Maryland Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told *Politico* after the meeting: “There was a discussion of how we have other ways of regime change. It’s not our role to do anything at this point from a kinetic point of view. It is our goal for regime change, but we’re not going to do it from a kinetic point of view.”

Similarly, a month later, Pentagon spokesman Vice Admiral William Gortney told the media, “We are not going after Gaddafi. At this particular point I can guarantee he is not on the target list.”

It would appear that the operative phrase in both of these statements was “at this point.” A month later, with Washington’s hopes that sustained aerial bombardment would provoke a coup within the Gaddafi regime unfulfilled and the so-called rebels unable to make any advance on Tripoli, the Obama administration is prepared to embrace other, openly criminal methods.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued an executive order barring such assassinations by the CIA in the face of global outrage over revelations of assassination plots against foreign leaders that had earned the agency the epithet of “Murder, Inc.”

Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush, breached Ford’s ruling, issuing his own intelligence finding that such restrictions did not apply in the “global war on terrorism.” Presumably, Obama can carry out a similar legal sleight of hand with a finding that assassination is permissible for “humanitarian” purposes.

The US deployment of Predator drones is one of a series of measures undertaken by Washington, London and Paris that signal a new escalation of the imperialist intervention against Libya.

Following a meeting in Paris Wednesday with Mustafa Abdel Jalil, head of the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council, French President Sarkozy vowed that French and other NATO warplanes—only six out of the alliance’s 28 members are participating in the operation—will escalate bombardments in Libya.

“We are indeed going to intensify the attacks and respond to this request from the TNC,” an Elysée Palace statement quoted Sarkozy as stating. The French president was the first to recognize the council and ordered his military to carry out the first air strikes against Libyan targets, before coordinating them with other NATO members.

Sarkozy’s statement was followed Thursday by a warning from NATO that an escalation of bombing is imminent and civilians will likely be killed.

“Our planners and pilots go to very great lengths to ensure we do all we can to reduce the risk to civilians when we attack targets, but the risk cannot be reduced to zero,” said Lt. Gen. Charles Bouchard, who is in charge of NATO operations in Libya. He urged civilians to “assist” NATO by “distancing themselves from Gaddafi regime forces and equipment whenever possible.”

The warning came as the Libyan state television reported that seven more civilians were killed and 18 wounded in a NATO air raid against the southwestern Tripoli suburb of Khellat Al-Ferjan late Wednesday night.

The state news agency Jana reported that earlier on Wednesday NATO warplanes struck the town of Bir Al-Ghanam, about 30 miles southwest of the Libyan capital, killing four civilians.

Meanwhile, there is growing speculation that Britain’s dispatch of some 600 Royal Marines and a naval task force to the island of Cyprus for “amphibious landing exercises” is a preparation for a direct intervention by ground troops into Libya.

Thursday, *The News*, the daily paper in Portsmouth, England, where the headquarters of the Royal Marine Commandos is located, reported “Royal Marines could be sent into Libya to help deal with the humanitarian crisis in the war-torn country.”

The paper quoted a Ministry of Defense official who said that the marines were part of the UK’s new Response Force Task Group, also known as Operation Cougar. While claiming that the deployment in Cyprus was a routine exercise, he added, “They are also a contingent capability available to the UK and to NATO for a range of things such as humanitarian disaster relief and evacuating people.”

The deployment follows reports that the European Union has drawn up detailed plans for sending a force of 1,000 combat troops to secure the battle-torn western port city of Misurata in the name of humanitarian relief.

Britain, France and Italy announced earlier this week that they are sending military “advisers” into Benghazi to aid the “rebels.”

A Ministry of Defense spokesman told the Portsmouth newspaper, “All I can say is at the moment there is no intention to use Cougar in light of Libya.”

Francis Tusa, a British military analyst, responded to this official statement, noting: “It’s interesting the MoD says there is no plan ‘at the moment’. They are not ruling out using the marines in Libya soon. In fact, I think they are actively ruling it in. I believe the odds are seriously in favor of this happening.”

Britain’s defense secretary, Liam Fox, and the chief of Britain’s defense staff, Gen. Sir David Richards, will travel to Washington Monday for an extremely rare “two plus two” meeting with their counterparts, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, the chief of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, the *Financial Times* reported Thursday.

The *Financial Times* speculated that the meeting would concern an appeal by the British military for the deployment of US Predator drones.

Clearly, that decision has already been taken, and the meeting between the top uniformed and civilian chiefs of the US and British military will concern itself with a further escalation of the intervention, in all probability, in the form of an invasion of Libyan territory by British and other NATO ground troops.

The Russian government, which joined Germany, China, Brazil and India in abstaining on United Nations Resolution 1973 that provided the cover for the imperialist intervention, expressed mounting concern over the continuing escalation.

Referring to the deployment of military “advisers,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said: “We consider such steps to be extremely risky and fraught with unpredictable consequences. There are cases in history when everything started with the sending of instructors and then everything went on for many years and led to the deaths of hundreds and thousands of people on both sides.”



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