

Scandinavian and other “neutral” states support assault on Libya

Steve James
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Eight Swedish SAAB JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft joined the NATO operation against Libyan government forces last week.

Based in Sicily and backed up with a transport aircraft and 130 support staff, it is the Swedish Air Force’s first airborne combat operation since 1963. The deployment follows the Swedish government’s decision in March to freeze €1 billion of Libyan assets and its refusal to recognise the Libyan embassy.

The Swedish military contingent will not be dropping its own bombs. But neighbouring Norway’s six US-made F-16 fighters have dropped laser-guided munitions on Libyan airbases and tanks.

Denmark has also sent six F-16s, which were involved in bombing raids from March 21 onwards. Finland has not sent any forces to date, but fully supports the NATO operation.

Cross party support was given to the operations in all the participating countries. Along with flight and transit rights offered to the operation from traditionally “neutral” Switzerland, Austria and Ireland, the assault on Libya has brought to the surface a universal embrace of imperialist militarism by the smaller governments of Europe. All view support for NATO’s attack on Libya as vital to secure their own international business and energy interests and to divert from social tensions at home.

The Swedish Riksdag voted 240 to 18 in favour of Fredrik Reinfeldt’s Moderate-led coalition’s decision to agree to a NATO request for fighter jets. The decision and vote was packaged in pseudo-humanitarian hypocrisy. Reinfeldt insisted, “Sweden must take its responsibility when our fellow human beings are threatened.”

Speaking March 30, days after hundreds of cruise missiles and laser guided bombs had poured out of the

sky to kill unknown numbers of Libyan soldiers trapped in outclassed tanks and anti-aircraft defences, new Social Democrat leader Håkan Juholt gave a show of concern. “We don’t know how the Libyan units are put together. For all we know they could be drugged children or child soldiers,” he said.

But during the Riksdag debate Social Democrat spokesman Urban Ahlin reassured all concerned that “So far, the attacks have stayed within the framework of the resolution [UN 1973—the so-called “right to protect” resolution], but they are touching upon the line.” Ahlin went on, “We respond when the UN calls for the protection of civilians, this is a Swedish tradition.”

Left Party leader Lars Ohly was the most belligerent. He explained March 22 that his party supported the no-fly zone, demanded that Libyan sovereignty be ignored and fully supported UN resolution 1973. The Left Party has previously supported Swedish troops being deployed to Afghanistan. Ohly’s only restriction on military involvement in Libya was that it should comply with resolution 1973 and not involve ground forces.

The Social Democrats and Left Party, like their peers across Europe, are seeking to deny a voice to the large numbers of working people who do not support, or are profoundly suspicious of the attack.

Only the far-right Sweden Democrats opposed the deployment. The party’s Mikael Jansson complained, “What right to we have to take sides in a civil war through a one-sided bombardment?”

The Swedish establishment’s real interests in the assault on Libya were clarified in a statement from Robert Egnell of the Swedish National Defence College. “If Sweden takes sides in what looks like a civil war, we may well lose our credibility in the Arab

world,” he cautioned. “That might hurt our international standing. But for the moment it is seen as important to be a credible and dependable international partner.”

The Swedish ruling corporations and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy increasingly view participation in US and NATO military adventures as vital to securing arms, telecoms and infrastructure contracts for Sweden’s substantial industrial base. Formerly neutral Sweden has become a close diplomatic ally of the US, a member of NATO’s “partnership for peace” programme and participates in NATO exercises and deployments.

Norway is a full NATO member with huge oil interests in the North Sea, the Arctic and internationally. Although Norway has joined the European Union’s Nordic Battle Group, in terms of exerting military influence over the lucrative Arctic, tiny Norway is mostly dependent on the US to restrict Russian influence and entirely dependent on NATO to defend its global interests.

Statoil, the leading oil company, currently brings in around €60 million annually from Libya, a small sum, with contracts from French-owned Total and Spain’s Repsol. Both France and Spain are participating in the attack on Libya. Shortly after the NATO bombing commenced, Shokri Ghanem, head of Libya’s National Oil Corporation, threatened to break existing agreements with oil companies working in Libya. By siding with those seeking to replace the Gaddafi government, the Norwegian government is no doubt hoping Statoil can lay claim to some more lucrative deposits in a reorganised Libya and North Africa.

Norway’s Labour government under Jens Stoltenberg received all party support for the government’s pro-war stance, including from the Conservative Party and the far right Progress Party. Labour is also in a coalition with the Socialist Left (SV), which endorsed Labour’s stance in government at a recent conference.

There were qualms. The Socialist Commission grouping within the SV warned, “Norway can’t, under any circumstances, contribute to a military operation that has a goal of removing Gaddafi’s dictatorship through use of foreign armed force.” But the majority opinion, as expressed by party leader and Minister of Education Kristin Halvorsen, easily won out.

Halvorsen insisted SV should back UN authorised

militarism. “I have many objections and so do you, probably”, she said. “However, the dilemma is clear: There would not have been a UN-led world if nobody allowed their fighter aircraft to be used to enforce UN decisions.” Halvorson was supported by Petter Eide, a former secretary of Amnesty Norge, CARE Norge and Norwegian People’s Aid. Eide hailed the UN action, commenting, “We should celebrate when the UN Security Council for the first time in history managed to agree on a resolution.”

Denmark also has global oil and shipping interests, including huge potential Arctic oil holdings. The country’s largest warship, the frigate HMS Esbern Snare, is currently deployed off the coast of Somalia, chasing pirates. Denmark has long been a key NATO member, and the current NATO general secretary, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, is a former Danish prime minister. As prime minister for the Danish Liberals (*Venstre*), Rasmussen supported the US assault on Iraq, while Denmark has sent troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The current Danish Liberal-led government, under Lars Løkke Rasmussen (no relation), has also been particularly aggressive regarding the attack on Libya, calling for the Danish parliament to approve fighters being deployed in advance of even NATO’s decision. In response, the Danish parliament voted unanimously, as requested political support came from the entire spectrum of official politics, from the ostensibly left Socialist Peoples Party to the right-wing Danish Peoples Party (DPP).



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