

Western powers fashion a puppet regime for Libya

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Amid continuing NATO bombing, the Libya contact group of the US and its allies met yesterday in Abu Dhabi to thrash out plans for a client regime to replace Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

For all the Western propaganda about establishing democracy in Libya, there are clearly fears that the country will descend into chaos if Gaddafi is finally forced from power. The self-appointed Transition National Council (TNC) comprising ex-Gaddafi ministers, Islamist leaders and various exile figures is heavily dependent on foreign assistance and commands limited popular support.

Speaking prior to yesterday's meeting, Britain's Middle East minister Alistair Burt declared that the Western powers were "very, very conscious" of the danger that Gaddafi's fall could create a sudden "vacuum in an authoritarian society."

Referring to the disaster that followed the US-led invasion of Iraq, Burt added: "Clearly we all hope some lessons have been learned, principally from Iraq, about how you maintain civil order, civil authority, so that there isn't this sense of powerlessness—and the seriously bad things happen."

Burt's comments reflect fears in Western capitals that the fall of Gaddafi will only be the prelude to protracted civil war along regional and tribal lines. He suggested that the Western-backed TNC was not a "government in waiting" and might have to work with some Gaddafi regime officials to prepare elections.

A *Financial Times* editorial on Tuesday sounded a similar warning, calling for the West to stay engaged. It appealed for "hard-headed restraint on all sides" and

cautioned against a "wholesale purge of regime employees." "This would simply provoke the sort of chaos that engulfed Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003. And there must be no factional power grab."

In Iraq, the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the marginalisation of his supporters rapidly produced a fracturing of Iraqi society along sectarian lines that was encouraged and manipulated by the US. Only through the wholesale slaughter of Iraqis was Washington able to cow the population and contain years of bitter armed resistance against its military occupation.

The *Financial Times* is obviously worried that there will be a repetition in Libya that will require another protracted Western military intervention. Despite repeated denials that foreign troops will not be sent to Libya, Middle East minister Burt hinted at a military occupation under the UN flag. The UN's views were crucial, he said, on whether there was a need for "a peacekeeping force" to protect the country's people.

These remarks point to the real discussion behind closed doors in Abu Dhabi yesterday. TNC officials were desperate for money, military support and political recognition and Western leaders, clearly aware of the unstable and dubious character of the grouping, were keeping them on a tight rein.

The meeting promised around \$1.3 billion in funds to the self-styled rebel regime based in Benghazi—with Italy, the former colonial power in Libya, offering up to \$600 million; France about \$420 million and a combined amount of \$280 million from Kuwait and Qatar. The figure fell well short of the \$3 billion in immediate money asked for by TNC, which is also seeking access to Libyan assets in foreign accounts ordered frozen by the UN

Security Council.

The US announced \$26 million in additional humanitarian aid for Libya, bringing its total to just \$81 million. At the same time, however, the Obama administration is seeking to push legislation through Congress to circumvent the UN Security Council Resolution and authorise the release of more than \$38 billion in Libyan funds held in US bank accounts.

The US and Britain have insisted that property laws in their countries have constrained the handing over of Libyan money to a rebel movement that lacks legal standing as the legitimate government of Libya. Neither country, however, has been willing to extend formal recognition to the TNC. Australia became the latest country to accept the TNC as “the legitimate interlocutor” on behalf of the Libyan people—a step well short of formal recognition. Other nations including France, Qatar and Italy have done the same.

The meeting in Abu Dhabi took place against the backdrop of continuing NATO bombing of Libya. After a temporary lull on Wednesday, following ferocious attacks on Tripoli by war planes and helicopter gun ships earlier in the week, a new round of air strikes struck the Libyan capital yesterday. According to Associated Press, a total of 14 bombing attacks had taken place by last night, mainly on the outskirts of Tripoli.

Speaking in Abu Dhabi, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: “Gaddafi’s days are numbered. We are working with our international partners through the UN to plan for the inevitable: a post-Gaddafi Libya.” Parrotting the latest US line, Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd suggested that there had been “multiple feelers” from Gaddafi supporters, suggesting “a growing desperation on the part of the regime as we believe it enters its end period.”

In Washington, CIA Director Leon Panetta, who has been picked to replace Defense Secretary Robert Gates, more cautiously told a Senate panel yesterday, “We have seen the [Libyan] regime weaken significantly... I think there are some signs that if we continue the pressure, if we stick with it, that ultimately Qaddafi will step down.”

Republican Senator John McCain argued for a more aggressive American military intervention, declaring:

“[T]he odds of a stalemate remain far too high. I believe US strategy should be to reduce those odds as much as possible and quickly force Qaddafi to leave power rather than hoping we achieve that objective with minimal effort.”

However, it not only the Gaddafi regime that is showing signs of strain. Speaking at a NATO summit in Brussels on Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Gates declared that those NATO countries engaged in the bombing campaign were “increasingly pressed”. He again put pressure on Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain and Turkey to become involved in the air attacks.

An unnamed American official told the *Los Angeles Times* that aircrews were “getting tired” and “the stress on aircraft is significant” in what was “a psychological war.” Along with the US, Britain and France, countries like Denmark and Belgium have joined air operations against Libya. “For some of them, it’s the first time they are involved in an air and ground war. This is not something they do as a matter of course.”

What concerns all of the governments involved is not so much the morale of military personnel but widespread popular opposition to another predatory imperialist war being waged to further the economic and strategic ambitions of the major powers in North Africa and the Middle East. The latest CBS News poll found that 60 percent of Americans are opposed to US involvement in the Libyan intervention, with only 30 percent in favour.

The fear in ruling circles is that this broad hostility, which finds no expression at present in the political establishment in the US or other countries, will eventually erupt in unexpected ways.



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