Military stalemate in Libya heightens US-NATO crisis

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Despite nearly four months of daily US-NATO bombing raids over Libya, so-called rebel fighters have failed to make any significant advance beyond the areas they controlled in March. Nor has the Gaddafi government disintegrated, as had previously been anticipated in Washington, London, and Paris. The stalemate in the oil-rich state has heightened the crisis confronting the imperialist powers engaged in the illegal regime-change operation.

On March 18, the day before the air strikes began, President Barack Obama reportedly declared that US involvement in the war would last for "days, not weeks." More than 15 weeks later, Obama and his European counterparts face considerable domestic opposition to the war and growing pressure to resolve the situation. The *Independent* recently cited unnamed senior French and British military commanders who reported that French President Nicolas Sarkozy last month demanded a "successful ending" to the war in time for a victory announcement on Bastille Day, July 14.

Sections of the US and European press are alarmed over NATO's inability to smash Libyan resistance to the intervention. *Financial Times* commentator Michael Peel yesterday warned: "While the regime is clearly being weakened by defections, economic sanctions and NATO air strikes, many Libya analysts say it is neither certain it will crack nor that it will do so quickly. Some observers suggest the worst case could be a 'Fortress Tripoli' scenario, in which Col Gaddafi pulls his forces back to the capital, holes up in his fortified compound and waits as *Gotterdammerung* unfolds in the streets around him."

Britain's Defence Secretary Liam Fox cautioned parliament that it "could take some considerable time yet" to oust Gaddafi. He added: "I'm afraid I think the chances of the opposition forces entering Tripoli is unlikely in the near future."

NATO aims to use its proxy force in Libya, the so-called Transitional National Council, to oust Gaddafi and install a pliant puppet regime that is more closely aligned with US, British, and French economic and strategic interests. The allied powers have by now largely dispensed with the pretence of enforcing UN Security Council 1973 and its supposed mandate to protect civilians.

Special forces and intelligence operatives are active on the ground, directing the activities of the "rebel" militia, while NATO is stepping up its gun-running operations for the anti-Gaddafi forces. The clear military logic of the campaign is for ever greater escalation, including stepped up air strikes aimed at terrorising the population in Tripoli, further assassination attempts against Gaddafi and his family, and preparation for a ground invasion.

France last week admitted supplying rocket launchers, assault rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank missiles to anti-Gaddafi forces in the western Nafusa Mountains. Yesterday the Libyan government said it intercepted two boats carrying more rifles, explosives, and ammunition, allegedly supplied by Qatar for the fighters in the Nafusa Mountains. These operations are now openly defended by NATO, with the organisation's chief, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, declaring that "the delivery of weapons has taken place as part of protection of civilians."

Rasmussen made this absurd claim following a NATO-Russia Council meeting. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov condemned the gun running as illegal. "We consider the arms embargo [under another UN Security Council resolution] to be unambiguous," he declared.

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“Any weapons deliveries are a violation of the resolution... They [NATO] have a different opinion—that the resolution can let anyone do anything.”

The Russian government invited South African President Jacob Zuma to join the discussion with NATO. Last Friday, the African Union issued a joint communiqué demanding an end to the war in Libya.

The South African-led proposal involves an immediate ceasefire and cessation of NATO bombing, negotiations between the Gaddafi government and the Transitional National Council brokered by regional African powers, and the possible intervention of a multinational peacekeeping force under the auspices of the United Nations.

The African Union added that its member states would not recognise the politically-motivated arrest warrants issued against Gaddafi and his associates by the International Criminal Court. The organisation’s chairperson, Jean Ping, said that the ICC is “discriminatory” because it targets alleged crimes committed in Africa while ignoring those committed by the US in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Every proposal for a negotiated end to the war that has been issued by the African powers, Italy, or Russia has been met with new US-NATO provocations. The allied powers are clearly determined to sabotage any diplomatic manoeuvres that cut across their agenda.

Immediately after the African Union released its proposal US and European forces intensified their bombardment. Agence France-Presse reported: “NATO data showed Monday that its warplanes have dramatically stepped up their bombing campaign in Libya. NATO flew 71 strike sorties in 24 hours, nearly double the daily tempo seen in past weeks, pounding targets on the eastern front at Brega and around Tripoli overnight Sunday. Seventeen strikes hit armoured vehicles, command and control nodes, military storage facilities and a tank in Brega, 150 kilometres from the rebel capital Benghazi.”

The Libyan government has also accused the NATO powers of undermining its negotiations with the Transitional National Council. The TNC has denied participating in talks with Gaddafi’s officials, but the government has insisted it has met with Abdel Fattah Younes al-Abidi, the former security minister, while Italian officials were present. According to the British *Telegraph*: “Some opposition tribal leaders and members of the Muslim Brotherhood are also said to be involved.”

Libyan deputy foreign minister Khaled Kaim said that the discussions had seen progress “in some areas”, but that “some member states of NATO don’t support talks between the government and the rebels”, which is why “there has been some delay in the outcome of the talks.”

Transitional National Council chairman Mustapha Abdul-Jalil revealed on Sunday that he had told Gaddafi that he could remain in Libya provided he gave up power. The *New York Times* noted: “The offer, which Mr. Abdul-Jalil said was made about a month ago through a United Nations envoy, appeared to be a tacit recognition—despite bluster on both sides—that neither Colonel Qaddafi nor his opponents seem likely to prevail militarily.”

Jalil immediately revoked the offer once it became publicly known, declaring there was “absolutely no current or future possibility for Gaddafi to remain in Libya.” This statement appeared an attempt to maintain the facade of unity within the deeply divided Transitional National Council, comprised of various ex-Gaddafi figures, Islamist forces, and US intelligence assets. TNC spokesman Abdel Hafiz Ghoga had earlier contradicted Jalil, insisting that no-one had discussed Gaddafi staying in Libya after the war.

The fact that Jalil offered any concession at all to Gaddafi reflects the understanding of at least a section of the TNC that the military situation has reached stalemate and that other means may be needed to end the impasse.

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