

The US policy of assassination

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1 July 2011

More than one hundred days into the Libya war, the US-NATO strategy is ever more nakedly aimed at political assassination.

US and European war planes have repeatedly bombed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's compounds, killing his relatives. Frustrated by the duration of the operation, which is stuck in an effective stalemate, military strategists are increasingly focusing on attempts to remove the Libyan head of state, transferring power to other forces within the regime. This is to be accomplished through a revolt within Gaddafi's inner circle or, absent that, assassination.

Earlier this week, Mike Turner, a Republican Congressman and member of the House Armed Services Committee, reported a discussion with Admiral Samuel Locklear, in which the commander of NATO in Italy explicitly acknowledged the assassination policy. According to Taylor, Locklear "explained that the scope of civil protection was being interpreted to permit the removal of the chain of command of Gaddafi's military, which includes Gaddafi."

On Tuesday, Stratfor, a think-tank with close ties to the US state apparatus, commented that war crime charges against Gaddafi from the International Criminal Court "provides added impetus to NATO's current strategy of using airpower to try to assassinate the Libyan leader as a means of accomplishing the mission: regime change."

Then on Wednesday, US President Barack Obama weighed in during a press conference that was largely focused on plans for massive cuts in social programs in the US. As a result of US action, Obama said, this "guy who was a state sponsor of terrorist operations against the United States of America is pinned down and the noose is tightening around him." It was not the first time that Obama chose to evoke language of a lynching in referring to Gaddafi.

The US-NATO policy of assassination, like the Libya war as a whole, is clearly illegal, under both international and national law. In attempting to explain why it is not in violation of the War Powers Act, which requires Congressional authorization for military action, the Obama administration has claimed, absurdly, that the Libya bombing does not rise to the level of "hostilities." If this is the case, however, the policy of assassination stands exposed as a naked attempt by a major imperialist power to murder a foreign head of state.

In the course of his press conference, Obama made a series of extraordinary statements in relation to Libya. He dismissed the constitutional questions raised by the War Powers Act—passed following the revelations of massive state lying and criminality during the US war in Vietnam—as "noise about process and congressional consultation and so forth." The president, supposedly a student of constitutional law, derisively attacked critics of the illegality of the Libyan war for making a "fuss."

Then—lacking even a pseudo-legal argument for his policy—Obama fell back on the argument that Gaddafi, "prior to Osama bin Laden, was responsible for more American deaths than just about anybody on the planet."

No one in the press corps sought to press the president on this declaration. Before the decision to bomb Libya in March, Gaddafi enjoyed friendly relations with all the major powers, including the United States. In 2003, Libya scrapped its nuclear and biological weapons program in a move that was hailed by the Bush administration as a model for Iran and North Korea.

In April 2009, Gaddafi's son, then Libya's national security minister, was greeted warmly by Hillary Clinton at the State Department, an event that was followed two months later by a well-publicized handshake between Gaddafi and Obama.

During this period, Gaddafi was signing major oil deals with US and European corporations. Then, for reasons that have never been clearly explained but are clearly bound up with the geostrategic interests of the European powers and the US, a decision was made to topple the Gaddafi regime and install a government that was even more beholden to the interests of imperialism.

After first attempting to remove the government through support for the “rebels” in the east and west, the US and NATO are now adopting a more direct method.

The US policy of assassination is not limited to Gaddafi, however. On Wednesday, the Obama administration released its “National Strategy for Counterterrorism,” which outlines a strategy of “targeted killings” wherever the US sees a threat to its interests. Counterterrorism advisor John Brennan declared in unveiling the strategy that “our best offense won’t always be deploying large armies abroad but delivering targeted, surgical pressure to the groups that threaten us.”

By “targeted, surgical pressure” is meant the use of aerial drones operated by the military and the CIA, along with Special Forces groups like that which assassinated Osama bin Laden. Under the Obama administration, the US has vastly increased its use of drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, and now Libya to kill anyone declared to be a “militant” or “terrorist.” A sixth country was added to the list last week, when US drone aircraft fired missiles at alleged leaders of an Al Qaeda-affiliated organization in Somalia.

In an earlier historic period, sections of the American ruling class recognized the immense dangers raised by such policies. In 1965, after coming to power and confronted with the evidence of US assassination plots in various parts of the world, President Lyndon Johnson famously stated that the US was “operating a damned Murder, Inc.”

In 1976, the Church Committee, which conducted the Senate investigations into CIA assassination plots, concluded that a policy of assassination “violates moral precepts fundamental to our way of life.” An executive order issued in the wake of the committee explicitly barred the practice.

There was, of course, never a golden age of American imperialism. However, the past 35 years have

witnessed a collapse of any pretense of legality and a democratic accountability. A policy of state killing is the culmination of a process that includes unending wars of aggression, torture, detention without charge, and the erosion of democratic rights in the United States itself. This has been closely bound up with the transformation of social relations within the US, the rise of a parasitic financial aristocracy and the extraordinary growth of social inequality.

Policies like pursuing Gaddafi’s assassination as military strategy will have profound consequences. The Obama administration and the American ruling class have established their willingness to extra-judicially kill anyone they view as an obstacle. It is not only a warning, moreover, to political organizations or heads of state in foreign countries; there can be no doubt that US government personnel would utilize similar measures against any significant domestic opposition.

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