

“Friends of Libya” meet in Paris for imperialist carve-up

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The “Friends of Libya” conference held in Paris Thursday signaled the beginning of the imperialist carve-up of the oil-rich North African country.

Jointly chaired by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron, the conference included participation by those countries which provided the fire-power under the umbrella of NATO and using a United Nations resolution as a cover to bring down the government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in a six-month war for “regime change.” These include the US, France, Britain, Italy and Qatar. All of them are jockeying to reap the greatest possible return on their “investment” of bombs and missiles that have claimed thousands of lives and left much of Libya’s infrastructure in ruins.

Also attending will be Germany, Russia, China, India and Brazil, which abstained on the UN Security Council resolution utilized as a legal fig leaf for the colonial-style war. These countries all fear that their significant investments and deals in Libya will be lost to the intervening Western powers.

In all, the conference included 31 heads of state, 11 foreign ministers and the leaders of the United Nations, NATO and the Arab League, along with the chief figures in the NTC, Justafa Abdul-Jalil, who until February was Gaddafi’s justice minister, and Mahmoud Jibril, a free-market economist who was the Gaddafi regime’s point man on attracting foreign investment.

On the eve of the conference, President Sarkozy cast the meeting in lofty terms, telling a gathering of French ambassadors in Paris that it would “turn the page on dictatorship and combat to open a new era of cooperation with a democratic Libya.”

As Sarkozy spoke, however, combat was very much continuing in Libya, with NATO warplanes carrying out fresh bombardments of the coastal city of Sirte, a stronghold of Gaddafi loyalists, and Bani Walid, a desert town to the west, which is also under control of forces supporting the ousted regime. As the NATO-led rebels continued their siege of the two cities, the NTC extended until September 10 the deadline for its ultimatum for the residents of Sirte to surrender or face an all-out military assault. NATO’s strategy may be to starve the city into submission.

Meanwhile, reports of massacres and atrocities carried out by the guardians of the new “democratic Libya” continue to mount, many of them directed against the large numbers of sub-Saharan African migrant workers who have been killed, abused and detained solely on the basis of the color of their skin.

The “friends” came to Paris not to discuss aid to Libya, but

rather the lifting of economic sanctions imposed under the Gaddafi regime and the unfreezing of Libyan assets in foreign banks, measures designed to get money and resources flowing out of the North African country

On the day of the summit, the French daily *Liberation* published the copy of a letter written in Arabic, purportedly from a representative of the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council, promising to cede to France 35 percent of its oil in return for its support. The Sarkozy government played the leading role in securing the UN resolution last March and got the jump on its NATO allies by ordering French air strikes before the Western alliance as a whole began bombarding the country.

The letter, dated April 3, states: “With regard to the oil agreement struck with France as a token of this Council’s gratitude, at the London summit, we, in our capacity as legitimate representative of Libya, have delegated to brother Mahmud [Shammam, the NTC’s media minister] the power to sign this agreement allocating 35 percent of total crude oil to the French in exchange for its total, permanent backing for our Council.”

The letter, which also asked for France to expedite arms deliveries, was addressed to the emir of Qatar, the Persian Gulf sheikdom that has acted as a liaison between the NTC and the Western powers, with a copy to Amr Moussa, the Arab League secretary general.

Quoting an earlier statement of Sarkozy insisting that France was acting in accordance with a “universal conscience” simply to “protect the civilian population,” *Liberation* comments: “Be that as it may, the French oil corporations might benefit amply from the military campaign.”

The French government and the French oil conglomerate Total claimed to have no knowledge of the letter, and a spokesman for the NTC in Benghazi charged that it was a fake. The AFP news agency reported that the letter appeared to be a document that had been circulated on the Internet earlier by opponents of French intervention in Libya.

Whatever the authenticity of the letter, the reaction of French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé was the most revealing. While also saying he had no knowledge of the letter, Juppé found nothing controversial about its contents.

“I am not aware of this letter,” he said. “What I know is the NTC said very officially that concerning the reconstruction of Libya it would turn in preference to those who helped it. That seems fair and logical to me.”

Juppé added, “There’s a declaration by the NTC but I am not aware of a formal deal. We’re not alone. Italy is also there, (and) the Americans.”

Spelling out that France considered its part in the war an investment that would be rewarded with Libyan oil wealth, the foreign minister said: “You know this operation in Libya costs a lot. It’s also an investment in the future because a democratic Libya is a country that will develop, offering stability, security and development in the region.”

Libya’s oil reserves are the largest in Africa, estimated at 44 billion barrels. Before the war, Libya was producing about 1.6 million barrels of oil a day. France was its second biggest market, second only to Italy, with over 15 percent of its imports coming from Libyan oilfields.

France’s aggressive pursuit of the spoils of the Libyan war has given rise to evident tensions with its European NATO allies.

Media commentary in both Italy and Britain has been dominated by warnings that France is stealing a march on Italian and British oil and business interests with its drive to be the first to go to war as well as first to recognize the NTC and reopen its embassy in Tripoli.

The *Telegraph* in Britain reported on the “Friends of Libya” conference: “Beyond discussions on Libya’s political and economic future, former Gaddafi allies and those at the forefront of the NATO-backed rebel uprising jostled to cash in on Africa’s top oil producing nation.

“French companies are planning an official trade mission to Libya for later in September. Britain has planned no such mission until the conflict is completely over, but William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, promised that the UK ‘will not be left behind.’”

And the Italian daily *La Stampa* warned this week that France was preparing to switch from bombing Libya to “fighting a cold war to prevent Italian companies from winning back their priority positions” in the Libyan oil sector. Until the war, Italy’s state-backed ENI accounted for 60 percent of production in Libya.

Germany, which refused to participate in the war, had sharply opposed an earlier bid by Sarkozy to launch a Mediterranean Union, designed to bring southern Europe and North Africa under French leadership and challenge Germany’s leading role in the European Union. Now there are sharp recriminations within the German ruling establishment over the decision to stay out of the NATO intervention.

The countries that stand to lose the most are Russia and China, which abstained from the UN Security Council vote and criticized NATO’s use of the UN resolution as a pretext for regime change.

Moscow hastily recognized the NTC on the eve of the conference in a transparent bid to protect its economic interests. The Russian foreign ministry issued a statement insisting that it expected “all previously agreed treaties and other mutual obligations will be implemented in good faith.”

The Russian daily *Kommersant* reported that Moscow had decided to recognize the NTC and participate in the Paris conference “to protect Russian economic and other interests. ... After all, Russia signed arms contracts worth \$2.1 billion with Muammar Gaddafi. Several more deals, worth at least that much,

were expected to be concluded in the future. Now those contracts are in doubt, along with the operations of Russian energy companies in Libya under the new authorities.”

Beijing has continued to withhold recognition, but said it accepted the council’s “significant position and role” and sent a vice foreign minister to the Paris conference. The official *People’s Daily* carried an article Thursday warning “Western powers not to take unfair advantage of reconstruction and business opportunities in post-Gaddafi Libya” and not to turn the Paris conference into “another Versailles [referring to the colonial carve-up that followed World War I], with Western powers scrambling to promote their interests in a war-torn country.”

The article described China as “a long-term constructive player” in Libya, working on some 50 projects worth \$18.8 billion and with 35,000 Chinese workers on the ground before the war began.

One of the strategic objectives of US imperialism and its Western European counterparts was precisely to counter growing Chinese influence in Libya and Africa generally, as well as Russia’s ambitions, which included talks with the Gaddafi government on acquiring a Mediterranean port for its navy in Benghazi.

The “Friends of Libya” conference was held on the 42nd anniversary of the coup by Gaddafi’s Free Officers Movement that overthrew the Western-backed regime of King Idris on September 1, 1969. The anniversary was noted by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others in their remarks. No doubt Washington and the other imperialist powers see more than a coincidence in the anniversary as they endeavor to return Libya to the status of semi-colony, under the thumb of the energy conglomerates and the direct military control of the US and NATO.



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