

Sarkozy and Cameron in Tripoli: Scramble for Libya is on

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With their surprise visit to Tripoli Thursday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron signaled that the scramble by the major powers for control of Libya's oil wealth is in full swing.

The visit was unannounced and conducted under a massive security blanket. It included a brief visit to a Tripoli hospital and a joint press conference with Mustafa Abdel Jalil, the former Gaddafi justice minister who heads up the NATO-backed National Transitional Council, and Mahmoud Jibril, the US-trained economist and former Gaddafi official designated as the NTC's "prime minister".

Afterwards, the Sarkozy, Cameron and the chiefs of the NTC all left the Libyan capital under heavy guard for the eastern city of Benghazi, where the NTC leaders have said they will stay until the fighting with Gaddafi loyalists in several key cities is over.

The hasty departure from Tripoli suggested that neither NATO nor its Libyan clients are confident about security in the capital under conditions in which battles are still raging for control of the coastal city of Sirte and Bani Walid, about 90 miles southeast of the capital.

Undoubtedly even more troubling for Cameron's and Sarkozy's security details is growing evidence that the NTC's control of Tripoli is tenuous at best. Islamist elements leading militias patrolling the capital's streets have denounced the NTC leadership, calling for its resignation.

In his speech in Tripoli, Cameron stressed that the NATO war on the country would continue. "There are still parts of Libya under Gaddafi's control, Gaddafi is still at large, and we must make sure this work is completed," said Cameron. "We must keep up with the NATO mission until civilians are all protected and this work is finished."

The pretense that the "NATO mission" is protecting civilians becomes more absurd each day. As Cameron

spoke, NATO warplanes bombed the towns of Sirte and Bani Walid. NATO's massive fire power is being used to enable the "rebels" to carry out the kind of siege of these population centers that the Western alliance initially claimed it was intervening to stop pro-Gaddafi forces from carrying out in Benghazi.

Cameron added that Britain would release some \$948 million in Libyan assets held in Britain—a fraction of the total—and deploy a team of British military "advisers" to assist the NTC.

For his part, Sarkozy insisted that France had no ulterior economic motives in attacking Libya.

"We have done what we did, because we thought it was the right thing to do," he claimed. He insisted that there had been no "behind the scenes deals on oil or reconstruction and that "we have asked for no preferences."

In his own remarks, however, Jalil made it clear that precisely such preferences were in the works. "Our friends will have a preferential role, in accordance with their efforts to help Libya," he said. While the NTC has stated that it would honor all previous contracts concluded by the Gaddafi government, Jalil indicated that this was by no means assured.

"We will accept the existing contracts as long as they are clean and transparent—but as a previous member of government, I know that some are not and must be reviewed," he said. Other NTC officials have flatly threatened that China and Russia would be frozen out of Libyan deals because of their opposition to the United Nations resolution authorizing a "no-fly" zone to protect civilians, which the NATO powers used as a pretext to wage a war for regime change.

There has been widespread speculation in the media that the Sarkozy government would cash in on being the first to recognize the NTC and the first to begin bombing Libya, with the French oil giant Total emerging as the

number one beneficiary.

Libya's National Oil Corporation announced Wednesday that Libyan oil exports will resume within 10 days. Production could reach 1 million barrels per day within six months.

Jeffrey Feltman, the US assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, arrived in Tripoli the day before the Sarkozy-Cameron visit. He came to secure American interests in the impending imperialist carve-up of Libya.

He also used the occasion to dismiss concerns that Islamist elements, some of them tied to Al Qaeda, have gained significant political power as a result of the NATO war to topple Gaddafi. "We are not concerned that one group is going to dominate the aftermath of what has been a shared struggle by the people of Libya," Feltman said in response to a question on the rising power of the Islamists.

That such concerns are growing, however, was made unmistakably clear with the publication Thursday of articles in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reporting on the rise of the Islamists, and growing struggles between them and the former Gaddafi officials and Western-connected émigrés backed by Washington and NATO. Both pointed to the increasing power of two Islamist figures: Ali Sallabi, who directs an Islamist umbrella group known as Etilaf; and Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who had collaborated with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and is now Tripoli's military commander.

This week Sallabi issued a statement demanding that NTC chairman Jibril resign, charging members of the council with monopolizing decision-making to reap personal fortunes for themselves. He warned that the NTC officials were preparing "a new era of tyranny and dictatorship."

Sallabi's statement provoked a demonstration by NTC supporters in Tripoli against the Islamists.

The *New York Times* quoted an aide to Belhaj as saying, "Jibril will be gone soon." The warning is ominous, given the fate of the NTC's former military commander and ex-Gaddafi interior minister, Gen. Abdel Fateh Younes. His burned body was dumped outside Benghazi last July, after he apparently fell afoul of Islamist militiamen.

The London-based Arabic daily *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* warned in an editorial Wednesday that the political tensions could turn into "bloody clashes between the two warring parties."

Though fighting continues in Libya and there are signs that the NATO-sponsored regime change may produce a

new civil war, both Sarkozy and Cameron suggested in their speeches Thursday that the Libyan war provided a new model for imperialist interventions.

In his remarks, Sarkozy issued a veiled threat that Syria could be the next target. "I dream that one day young Syrians will be as lucky as the young Libyans today, that one day they will also be able to say: 'democracy and a peaceful revolution are for us.'"

Meanwhile, the commander of the Pentagon's Africa Command (AFRICOM) made it clear that the US military sees the Libyan war as the prelude to new imperialist wars in the region. Gen. Carter Ham indicated that AFRICOM's role in the Libyan intervention had been something of a baptism by fire for a command that had been largely dedicated to military assistance missions and attempts to find bases for US military forces on the African continent.

"Dropping bombs and Tomahawks, those kind of things, was not something the command had practiced to the degree we were required to do" in Libya, he said. "The question for us now is how do we sustain that so that if we would have to do this again, we'd start at a higher plateau."

Ham also said that he wanted to secure more special operations forces for AFRICOM to conduct "counterterrorism" operations in Africa. He pointed to three groups that he said posed a threat: Al-Shabab in East Africa, the Nigeria-based Boko Haram and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

This last group, AQIM, had merged in 2007 with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group from which much of the leadership of the NATO-backed rebel forces in Libya are drawn.

Ham voiced concern about reports that portable surface-to-air missiles from the Gaddafi regime's stockpile had gone missing as a result of the US-NATO war. He also said that Washington and NATO had to ensure that the Islamist elements that they have armed and supported do not "reemerge to be part of the interim government or subsequent government."



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