

# US Navy SEALs seize tanker carrying Libyan oil

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On Sunday, with the world's attention focused on the Crimean referendum, President Barack Obama ordered the deployment of the US military to seize the oil tanker *Morning Glory* in international waters off the southeast coast of Cyprus.

The move is bound up with an attempt to prevent the complete disintegration of the Libyan state—and the profits of American corporations with stakes in Libyan oil.

Libya has been devastated by the 2011 NATO-led war using proxy forces to topple longstanding dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and establish a neocolonial regime. Libya is now under the control of rival right-wing militias, which were promoted by the US, the European powers and the Persian Gulf monarchies. The militias have plundered the country for their own enrichment.

Libya represents yet another catastrophe created by US imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa, through interventions falsely presented as bringing prosperity, freedom and democracy to the region. So bad is the situation that the influential *Foreign Policy* magazine acknowledged March 18, “Over the last couple of weeks, Libya has been rocked by events that have pushed the country to the edge of full-scale civil war.”

The tanker, loaded with at least 234,000 barrels of crude oil valued at \$35 million, had been under the control of one of Libya's militias in the eastern province of Cyrenaica. Having blockaded the oil ports since last summer in pursuit of greater autonomy that would enable it to control the distribution of oil wealth, the militia had sought to export oil independently of the Libyan government in Tripoli. Secessionist forces had threatened to load another tanker in the port of Tobruk.

On Monday, two dozen Navy SEALs using high-

speed boats carried within range by the guided missile cruiser *USS Roosevelt* boarded the tanker. It is now on its way back to a government-controlled port in Libya.

Obama said the governments of Libya and Cyprus had asked for US assistance. The State Department had earlier warned that it considered the shipment a “theft from the Libyan people,” while noting that several American companies have stakes in the oil.

The ship was owned by a United Arab Emirates-based company, but operated by a Saudi Arabian-based company, flying a North Korean flag, and manned by an international, mainly Asian, crew. Pyongyang announced on the weekend that it had “cancelled and deleted” the ship's North Korean registry, as it violated its law “on the registry of ships and the contract that prohibited it from transporting contraband cargo.”

Oil and gas, mainly located in Cyrenaica, account for 95 percent of government revenues, including the key oil ports of Es-Sider and Ras Lanuf. The declaration of “autonomy” for Cyrenaica led to an almost total collapse in oil production to less than one tenth of normal levels.

By last October, the rebels' leader, Ibrahim Jathran, had blocked more than \$5 billion in Libyan national oil exports and began threatening to sell “their oil” on the open market. This forced the government to draw on its reserves to pay the wages of many Libyans who hold jobs financed directly or indirectly by oil, and to pay for the country's imports.

When the rebels loaded oil onto the *Morning Glory*, Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, sought to stop them. But with Libya's warships destroyed by NATO's bombs and its air force in a state of mutiny, Zeidan was forced to turn to the Libyan Shield, an alliance of militias led by the Misrata militia, which allowed the *Morning Glory* and its cargo to slip through the blockade.

The next day, on March 11, Congress, largely made up of Islamist forces linked to the Muslim Brotherhood who had long opposed Zeidan, sacked him and appointed the former defence minister Abdullah al-Thani as replacement for two weeks, pending a vote by Congress on a new prime minister. When prosecutors charged him with corruption and imposed a travel ban, Zeidan fled the country for Germany, declaring his ouster unconstitutional, as it did not have the requisite number of votes in Congress.

Congress enjoys no authority, chiefly because it was put in place by outside powers. It has failed to address the appalling security situation, the destruction caused by the war, and the 30 percent unemployment rate that make daily life a misery for Libya's 6 million people. Notwithstanding the corruption and social inequality that prevailed under Gaddafi, the standard of living was the highest in Africa before the NATO-led war.

When Congress sought to extend its mandate that expired last month until the end of the year, it provoked angry demonstrations. It has now agreed to hold parliamentary elections this summer, without waiting for the drafting of a new constitution. Barely one third of the 3.4 million Libyans registered to vote turned out for elections on February 20 to the 60-member Constitutional Assembly, whose task is to approve a new constitution to be drafted within four months by a three-member committee representing each of Libya's three provinces. In this fashion, it would institutionalise the country's divisions.

Congress dispatched Libyan Shield militias to try and seize control of the oil ports in eastern Libya, leading to armed clashes with the rebels that resulted in several deaths. On Monday, a car bomb—assumed to be planted by Islamist militants opposed to the secessionists—targeted the military barracks in Benghazi where a graduation ceremony was taking place, killing five soldiers and wounding ten.

The militia in the town of Zintan, which backed Zeidan and is opposed to the Misrata militia, mobilised in the west, near the border with Tunisia. Zintan lies alongside the pipelines carrying oil from the west to the coast. Its militia, in alliance with Berbers in the north and Tobu tribesmen in the south, has on several occasions cut the pipelines and occupied the oilfields, raising the prospect of the government in Tripoli facing an almost total oil blockade.

In the south, leaders in Fezzan met to consider whether to secede, while in Tripoli, a militia stormed, looted and burned an army headquarters.

It was the fear that the fragile Libyan regime, put in place by Washington and its allies, would descend into outright civil war that led to the decision to deploy the US Navy SEALs.

The situation in Libya is catastrophic not only for its own people. Conflict and instability have already spread beyond its borders to Mali and the Central African Republic. It has been no different in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia or Sudan, all of which faced US wars or US-backed military interventions, destabilising their neighbours.

The Morning Glory incident exposes what was always at the heart of the Libyan war—the control over the country's rich energy resources. The imperialist powers were only able to mask the neocolonial character of the war to topple Gaddafi because they were assisted by a variety of pseudo-left forces in both Europe and the US, including groups such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain and the International Socialist Organisation in the US. They cast the imperialist war against Libya as not merely a "humanitarian" intervention, but a "revolution" by the Libyans themselves.

The present-day state of Libya—its disintegration into fiefdoms of rival militia warlords, the paralysis of its economy, the displacement of more than 1 million people and the poverty of its population—provides devastating proof that the military intervention was not to support a "revolution," but to facilitate imperialist plunder.



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