# Italian government sends weapons to northern Iraq

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**25 August 2014**

Last week, Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD) paid a lightning visit to Iraq. In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD). At the same time, parliamentary committees in Rome voted for the first time to deliver weapons to the Kurdish fighters of the Peshmerga.

Renzi came to Iraq not only as Italian head of government, but also as a representative of the European Union (EU), whose chairmanship accrues to Italy in the second half of 2014. “Europe has to be in Iraq these days, otherwise it would not be Europe,” Renzi said in a meeting with former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in the Iraqi capital on August 20.

Having travelled from Baghdad to Erbil, he visited a refugee camp there and pointed out that Italy had already dispatched several planeloads of relief aid. Designated prime minister Haidar Al Abadi and Iraqi president Fouad Mazuum also met Renzi for talks, drawing attention several times to “the friendship between our peoples”.

Renzi is acting in close cooperation with the German foreign office. On the same day, last Wednesday, the committees for defence and foreign affairs in both Italian parliamentary chambers (senate and house of representatives) used identical arguments to justify a vote for the fastest possible delivery of arms and munitions to the Kurds in northern Iraq.

Speeches from Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti and Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini made it clear that a concerted EU initiative is underway. “The Mediterranean and the Middle East are facing a danger, which is also threatening Europe and Italy,” Foreign Minister Mogherini told the press. She is the candidate proposed by Renzi to succeed Lady Catherine Ashton as EU high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. According to Mogherini, Europe and Italy have “the political and moral duty to protect civilians.”

Defence Minister Pinotti told the senate that Italy was not the only country active in the region, but was there together with France, England and Germany. Italy would not only supply Iraq with weapons; it would also provide strong diplomatic support. Pinotti raised the prospect of a European summit on the situation in Iraq and the region, and announced that she would be pressing for an international summit conference. She added that the EU was working “in constant communication with actors in the region and with countries that have a clear and direct influence on Iraq,” citing as examples Iran, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

Propaganda justifying arms deliveries on humanitarian grounds manifests itself in particularly absurd forms in Italy. For example, Prime Minister Renzi sent out a photo on Twitter posing with refugee children, with the comment, “War shouldn’t be declared on children”.

The truth is that the government is having problems justifying its cynicism and duplicity. While shedding crocodile tears over refugee problems in northern Iraq, it intensifies its attacks on refugees who want to cross the Mediterranean to Europe.

Interior Minister Angelino Alfano of the right-wing Nuovo Centrodestra party (NCD), has announced the government’s intention to close the so-called refugee rescue operation, Mare Nostrum (Our Sea). “Mare Nostrum won’t be having a second anniversary,” he said, adding that the programme had indeed been worthwhile, but was planned from the start as only a

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temporary measure.

Partially supported by EU funds, Operation Mare Nostrum was launched by the Italian coast guard in October 2013, when almost 400 people drowned in a single day in the disaster off the island of Lampedusa. Although it served to build up Italy's armed forces, it has also contributed to the rescuing of nearly 100,000 refugees at sea in the first half of 2014. Some 1,900 people were rescued last weekend alone, according to coast guard reports.

The fact that a large proportion of the refugees are people from Libya, Syria and the whole Middle East—including many Palestinians fleeing Israeli bombardment—clearly demonstrates the real character of the alleged "humanitarianism" of the Western powers. These people are in flight because NATO together with US and European imperialism are involved in bloody wars in their countries, supporting such wars directly and indirectly with weapons.

The refugees in Italy are deprived of any legal security or hopeful future prospects. Those who find work often end up as low-wage slaves employed by the Mafia in fruit harvesting.

The arms shipments to northern Iraq are in fact used to beat the drums for war, whip up nationalism and promote state rearmament.

When he took office in February, Renzi used a two-hour speech before the senate to call for the "coming together of the nation", the "end of ideological struggles" and the "courage to make radical decisions". He announced massive attacks on the social services and state administration, as well as the reduction of employers' ancillary wage costs and business taxes. The country had become "rust-ridden, bogged down and encumbered by a suffocating bureaucracy," Renzi proclaimed at the time.

Since then, the economic and social crisis has intensified. Now, Renzi wants to exploit military intervention in Iraq to renew and sharpen his attack on Italian workers.

The situation is already catastrophic for many workers. A large section of the working class are condemned to a permanently makeshift existence. The online newspaper *L ' Informazione* has exposed the entrenched poverty conditions in Sicily. These include accounts of workers who can no longer afford accommodation costs and have to sleep with their wives and children in cars. Large families consisting of parents living with their adult children, who had children themselves, are forced to survive on the pension of a single retired worker. In another case, a 10-member extended family live in a three-room apartment and have to get by on a single €800 pension.

One-and-a-half million people, mainly in the south of Italy, officially live below the poverty line. In reality, the figure is much higher. Young people are particularly affected, with some 44 percent between the ages of 15 and 24 officially unemployed. As for pensioners, Mario Monti's pension reform raised the retirement age two years ago, drastically increasing poverty in old age. According to the Istat statistics agency, 30 percent of retirees today are so poor that they have to do without medical treatment.

Workers are threatened with mass layoffs and brutal wage cuts—for example, at Fiat, Electrolux and Alitalia, as well as in the public service. The Renzi government's "Jobs Act" labour reform policy ensures that employees will more easily be sacked, public service jobs more easily dismantled, and temporary work contracts extended to three years.

Since the first half of 2014, Italy has once again been fully in the grips of recession. Pressure is therefore mounting on Renzi to attack the working class even more viciously. The *Corriere della Sera* daily newspaper thus calls on Renzi to proceed in a more determined manner, writing: "Why isn't he going ahead with the labour reform, as he promised?"

In several drawn-out meetings, Silvio Berlusconi and trade union leaders have pledged Renzi their support. Nichi Vendola's pseudo-left party, SEL, is also backing the war and crisis policies of the bourgeoisie. In an article by two pro-SEL journalists, Renzi was urged to campaign strongly for a reform of the United Nations. The "task of exercising an international police operation," should not be left to the Kurds, they wrote. Instead, the UN had to be upgraded to enable it "to intervene with weapons to defend unarmed civilians, when that is necessary."

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