France preparing military strikes against southern Libya

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10 January 2015

The French military is preparing to launch strikes against targets in Libya within the next three months according to an anonymous French diplomatic official who spoke to the London-based Arab-language paper *Asharq Al-Awsat.*

"I am ready to bet that this intervention will take place within three months," the unnamed diplomatic source said.

"The question is no longer whether France will intervene militarily in Libya, but when," the diplomat made clear in comments made late last week .

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian gave similar indications during his visit to Niger last week while visiting a new French military base near the Niger-Libyan border. Without openly calling for war, Le Drian strongly indicated that the French government and military consider some form of intervention in Libya as imminent.

"We think that the moment has come to ensure that the international community tackles the Libyan problem. I think this is also what President Issoufou believes," Le Drian commented, referring to his recent meeting with the President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou.

President Issoufou explicitly called for military intervention by the Western powers in Libya, reiterating the position of several African heads of state that military action by the major powers is necessary to contain rising chaos in the country. "An international intervention is essential to the reconciliation of all Libyans," Issoufou said last week.

Tobruk regime representative Ashur Bou Rashed echoed these demands, calling for intervention by the major powers in support of the government.

"We call on the international community to assume its legal and moral responsibilities and to arm, without further delay, the Libyan army," Rashed said.

Defense Minister Le Drian issued grave warnings in recent weeks that Libya has become an incubator for violent extremist groups. Libya had become a "sanctuary for terrorists," he warned, in a speech to assembled French troops stationed in Niger's capital of Niamey.

"Libya is in chaos today and it is a breeding ground for terrorists who threaten the stability of Niger and, further afield, France," Le Drian said.

Le Drian insisted that Libya is becoming "a hotbed of terrorism in the heart of the Mediterranean" and that the NATO powers must not "remain passive," in similar remarks at the end of December.

Previous statements by the French defense minister made clear the new incursions into southern Libya are one component in a broader, continent-wide neocolonial agenda pursued by French imperialism. Le Drian said that counterterrorism operations by French troops and local proxy forces would be necessary across an "area that runs from the Horn of Africa to Guinea-Bissau."

Le Drian's invocations of the threat posed by terrorist groups in Libya turns reality on its head. For decades, the US and European governments have cultivated Islamist and other extremist militant groups as political allies and paramilitary proxy forces.

During its more recent machinations in Libya and Syria, the US government directly supplied weapons, training, and financial aid to extremist militants linked with Al Qaeda. Militant groups throughout Africa and the Middle East, including the extremist militants backed by the US and NATO against Gaddafi, receive financial support from US-aligned governments in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The driving force behind the tide of imperialist violence sweeping across Africa is not the threat of terrorism, but the financial and commercial interests of the US and European capitalist elites, who are striving to expand their spheres of control on the continent and counter growing Chinese economic influence through war. The looming renewed military assault on Libya is only the latest phase in the long-term imperialist agenda to reorganize African politics along neocolonial lines.

Aside from helping overthrow governments, the main role of extremist groups in Africa, as in the Middle East and southern Asia, is to serve as the central bogey man of the all-purpose ideological cover of the "war on terror." The very same social forces which the imperialists had supported during the onslaught against Libya are now cynically

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presented as the justification for endless new wars and occupations.

Barely more than a year after arming Islamist brigades with known ties to Al Qaeda organizations as a means to overthrow Gaddafi—propelling a huge outflow of weapons and militias across the border from Libya into nearby countries in the Sahel and West Africa—France launched a full-scale invasion of Mali, codenamed Operation Serval.

Supposedly in response to the seizure of towns in northern areas of the country by Islamist militants and Tuareg mercenaries fleeing the breakup of the Gaddafi regime, Operation Serval aimed to achieve the "total reconquest" of Mali, Defense Minister Le Drian boasted in 2013.

Operation Serval has proven to be the spearhead for the establishment of a permanent French military occupation of the Sahel, under the umbrella of Serval's successor project, codenamed Operation Barkhane.

Operation Barkhane, officially launched on August 9 with air strikes against targets in northern Mali's Essakane region, gives a sense of the real purpose behind the drumbeat of new military missions being developed by US and European militaries against Libya and numerous other African countries.

Barkhane's stated goal is to "regionalize" French military efforts throughout the Sahel, establishing a network of bases and permanent troop deployments that will serve as the foundation for continuously expanding "region-wide securitization efforts," to be conducted by thousands of French troops dispersed across countries including Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. The areas of the Sahel desert occupied by French forces contain major uranium resources that are critical for the operations of French capitalism.

Barkhane's command staff will be stationed in Chad's capital of N'Djamena, along with a new air force base to provide aerial surveillance and air support for the mission. The operation has also established a headquarters for special forces units in Burkina Faso, and another outpost in Gao, Mali manned by at least 1,000 troops, an intelligence outpost in Niamey with a garrison of more than 300, and a number of smaller bases occupied by 30-50 soldiers each, according to the *National Interest*.

Advanced guard detachments of US and NATO military and intelligence agents were deployed to Libya to engage in military training and other unnamed activities in March 2014, according to the private intelligence firm Stratfor.

The specific cause of increasing urgent calls for military action in Libya may be the threat of further disruptions of Libya's oil production resulting from the struggle between rival governments based in Tripoli and Tobruk.

Sovereignty over Libya's territory and energy resources is currently contested by two loosely integrated semi-states, made up of elements of the old government and various ethno-sectarian armed formations. While the internationally recognized parliament in Tobruk has received recognition from major governments, the nation's capital of Tripoli is controlled by militias affiliated with Libyan Dawn, including elements of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and other Al Qaeda-linked forces. The Libya Dawn militants established their insurgent government in the capital Tripoli after seizing the city in August 2014.

In the past month, Tripoli-based militias have damaged several large oil facilities during attempts to capture two of Libya's main oil export facilities at Sidra and Ras Lanuf. The Libya Dawn-aligned militants set fire to at least five oil storage tanks at the Sidra oil terminal, destroying as much as $1 billion worth of oil.

Libyan National Army (LNA)-controlled air forces—which have reportedly been equipped with new war planes from Russia—also launched repeated strikes on oil facilities held by the Tripoli-based opposition forces in recent weeks. LNA jets launched missiles Monday at the Greek oil tanker ARAEVO, supposedly after warning the ship not to dock at the port of Derna, which is controlled by Islamist militant groups that have formally affiliated with the Islamic State, as part of LNA efforts to prevent oil and other commercial goods from transiting through the port cities of Derna and Benghazi.

The civil war in Libya is creating conditions for the eruption of new regional wars. As a result of its support for the Libya Dawn forces, the Turkish government is now effectively at war with the Tobruk government in eastern Libya. On Wednesday, Turkey issued a warning to Turkish citizens and airliners to leave Libya, in response to threats by the Tobruk regime to attack any Turkish ships and planes that approach the areas under its control.

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