

Italy threatens military intervention in Libya

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Four years after an international coalition intervened to force the overthrow of Libya's long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi, Italy's government is pressing for a new military intervention.

This is being sold to the public based on the rising influence of Islamist militias, which are supposedly also threatening Italy. In reality, the drive to intervention is being driven by major Italian oil and business interests in the North African country, where Italy has a long and bloody colonial history. The sabre-rattling over Libya also serves to divert attention from the growing domestic social and political tensions.

Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti declared on 15 February that a military mission in Libya was "urgently required." Italy was prepared to lead a coalition of European and North African states, and send 5,000 soldiers to Libya, she told the *Messaggero* newspaper.

The statement came a day after Italy had ordered the withdrawal of all diplomatic personnel from Libya. Diplomats and business people from Britain, the United States and other Western countries had already left Tripoli.

Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni confirmed three days later that it was time for a "robust response" in Libya. "We are dealing with a country that has a large territory, and whose institutions have failed. This has potentially grave consequences." In parliament on Friday, Gentiloni reaffirmed Italy's readiness to intervene militarily in Libya.

Italian warships have been patrolling the Libyan coastline since Monday. Officially, the operation "Open Sea" has been declared an exercise. The commanding admiral, Pierpaolo Ribuffo, stated that there was no direct connection to the Libya crisis, but added, "Obviously the presence of ships at sea also means security, deterrence and dissuasion."

By contrast, the Italian press is reporting, based on information from defence experts, that warships are ready to intervene in an emergency and secure the offshore oil installations of the Italian oil concern ENI.

The media are daily invoking the spectre of an attack by Islamic State (IS) on Italy. Last year, a branch of IS proclaimed a caliphate in the Libyan coastal town of Darna on the Egyptian border. Darna is located, as the Italian media continually repeats, just 850 kilometres from Italy. According to reports, the militia in Darna consists of 800 fighters, of whom 300 had previously fought in Syria against the Assad regime. The Egyptian air force bombed the town on February 15, following the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians. The Islamist militia has subsequently reportedly withdrawn from Darna.

On Saturday, the Italian media seized on a 64-page document

that is circulating in Italian on the Internet calling on Muslims to aid the Caliphate by conquering Rome and Constantinople.

The growth of Islamist militias in Libya is the direct result of the imperialist intervention four years ago. Darna is in the Bengasi region, where the Western-financed uprising against Gaddafi began early in 2011. To overthrow the long-time ruler, the United States, France, Britain and their allies not only provided the rebels with air support, they also armed and financed them, including the Islamist militias. Italy made available its military bases in Sicily and participated in many bombing raids during the war.

Italian colonial rule

This was how Italy marked the 100th anniversary of its colonial rule over the country. In 1911, Italian troops invaded then Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, turning these regions into Italian colonies. But during the First World War, Italy lost most of its control again.

The fascist leader Mussolini conquered the colony once again and expanded it to include all of present-day Libya. More than 100,000 Libyans were killed at the time through hunger, terror, pogroms, kidnappings and poison gas attacks. Throughout the whole of North Africa, 500,000 fell victim to imperialist aggression, which was only concluded with Italy's defeat in 1943.

When oil was discovered in Libya following the Second World War, Italy's Agip oil concern, a predecessor to and now part of ENI, led the way and secured production rights in 1959. Libya possesses the largest proven oil reserves in Africa, and for more than 60 years, since the founding of ENI, Italy has led the way in exploiting these resources.

The nationalisations under Gaddafi, who came to power in 1969 at the head of an army officers' coup that overthrew the British-installed King Idris, interrupted this bonanza temporarily. But from 2008, the Berlusconi government was able to form close ties with the Gaddafi clan, and the Libyan leader invested his money not only in ENI, but also in arms concern Finmeccanica, Juventus football club and numerous other Italian firms. Until 2011, when Gaddafi was overthrown and the country fell into conflicts between rival militias, Italy produced 300,000 barrels of oil and gas daily.

Italy took part in the NATO war against Gaddafi so as to defend its interests, including its production and processing facilities, under the new setup. Italy sought quickly to establish relations with the transitional council in Benghazi. ENI was the first company to resume and expand its production in Libya, and Italy was soon obtaining 15 percent of its oil and gas demand from GreenStream, the 516-kilometre-long pipeline from the Libyan town of Mellitah to Sicily. Contracts with the Libyan government

are to guarantee these projects until 2047.

All this has now been called into question with the new civil war. Oil production has practically come to a halt. On February 15, Italy pulled out the employees of a number of Italian subsidiaries, mainly of ENI, along with its diplomats.

The Renzi government

Along with Italy's imperialist interests, the internal political crisis is also driving the preparations for war in Libya. Militarism, terror and anti-immigrant chauvinism are designed to divert attention from mounting social tensions.

Since Matteo Renzi took over as premier at the age of 39 a year ago, he has pushed forward attacks on social rights and deregulation of the labour market. The country has debts of more than €2 trillion (135 percent of GDP) and has been in recession for years with terrible consequences. Fully 28 percent of the population are at risk of poverty, and in the south it is even higher, at 46 percent.

To maintain control over the opposition to his austerity agenda, Renzi has manoeuvred between different sections of the bourgeoisie to win them over to his goals. To begin with, he was raised to power by the trade unions and the SEL (Left, Ecology, Freedom) party of Nichi Vendola. Once in office, he maintained the coalition of his predecessor, Enrico Letta, with the New Centre Right (NCD) of Angelino Alfano, which had split from Silvio Berlusconi's party.

In order to pass the Jobs Act labour market reform, constitutional amendments and electoral reforms through parliament, Renzi concluded the so-called Nazerener pact (named after the address of Renzi's Democratic Party on Largo Nazereno) with Berlusconi. The pact held until the end of January 2015, when Renzi enforced the naming of former judge and Christian Democrat Sergio Mattarella as president against Berlusconi's opposition.

Renzi's political manoeuvres have produced sharp political tensions. Many politicians have reached the end of their nerves. On February 13, after strong verbal exchanges in parliament, a brawl broke out between SEL and Democratic Party deputies, slightly injuring two SEL parliamentarians. The SEL felt angered because the government, without acknowledging the demands of the opposition, forced the constitutional and electoral reforms through parliament in a marathon overnight session.

After the brawl, all opposition parties left parliament and boycotted the vote on the constitutional reforms, which the government's deputies passed by 309 votes to 2 in front of half-empty benches. Along with the extreme right-wing Lega Nord, Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the neofascist Fratelli D'Italia and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, SEL held a press conference in which it condemned the government.

The SEL is once again fully behind the government with its war preparations against Libya. It has justified this by pointing to the supposedly growing Islamist danger. Nichi Vendola declared that the time had come when a big country like Italy could influence Europe and play a role. "The fight to defeat ISIS and the insane proposal for a caliphate" was an enormous obligation and would take several years.

SEL collaborates closely with Syriza and Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras. In May 2014, they ran in the European elections as

the Tsipras List.

Both SEL and Renzi are seeking international backing for an Italian military intervention in Libya by pressing for a UN mandate and the broadest possible coalition. As Renzi declared on television on February 18, the UN has to make sure that "all players, the local tribes, the members of the African Union and the Arab and European countries" would be integrated into such an intervention.

The war preparations are accompanied by an ever-sharpening wave of anti-immigrant propaganda. Thousands of desperate people are arriving in Italian ports, fleeing from war, terror and extreme poverty produced by imperialist interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. Now, the government is attempting to connect these immigrants with the infiltration of terrorists.

The extreme right profits

The coming together of SEL and the government, and the anti-immigrant propaganda is giving encouragement to the far right.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of people participated from across Italy in a major rally in Rome, called by the Lega Nord, but which also included openly fascist forces like Fratelli D'Italia and CasaPound.

The Lega Nord, which initially emerged with its calls for the separation of Italy's richer northern regions, has been trying to portray itself as a national party since the leadership was taken over by 42-year-old Matteo Salvini. Their model is the French National Front under Marine Le Pen.

The rally took place under the slogan "Send Renzi home." Salvini denounced the prime minister as a "stupid slave of the EU" and a friend of big capital, while he posed as the advocate of small and medium-sized businesses. He attacked the euro, Brussels and German chancellor Angela Merkel, and defamed immigrants as "insects."

Marine Le Pen spoke by video link to the demonstrators in Rome. A message of greeting was also read out from Hans-Christian Strache, head of the extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). In the polls, the Lega Nord is currently at 15 percent, ahead of Berlusconi's Forza Italia. At the last election in 2013, it obtained just 4 percent.



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