Western powers press ahead with plans for new war in Libya

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Five years after NATO's Libya war, Italy, the EU and the US are in the advanced stages of preparations for the next military intervention. The Western imperialist powers want to establish their own military bases in Libya in order to control the country's massive sources of oil and natural gas, and secure an important gateway to Africa.

For months, the North African country has seen a secret build-up of American, British, French and Italian agents and officers, while reconnaissance and armed drones controlled from Sigonella in Sicily have conducted surveillance missions and air strikes in Libya.

Last week, the EU and US moved forward with the installation of their puppet regime in Tripoli. The designated government leader, Fayiz as-Sarraj, left his exile in Tunisia on Wednesday by ship and arrived in the Libyan capital at the head of a nine-member-strong government delegation. As-Sarraj is a front man built up by German UN negotiator Martin Kobler, and has been tasked with demanding an official military intervention at the United Nations as soon as possible against ISIS forces in Libya.

As-Sarraj, a 54-year old architect from Tripoli, has been dispatched to form a so-called government of national unity. He has returned to a deeply-divided and ruined country, in which at least two governments and five militias are conducting a bloody civil war. As-Sarraj can at most rely on the half-hearted support of a section of the internationally recognised parliament which is currently located in Tobruk in the east of the country.

A counter-parliament sits in Tripoli, supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, along with a counter-government under Chalifa al-Ghweil.

A special role is being played by General Chalifa Haftar, a former officer in the government of Muammar Gaddafi, who participated in Gaddafi’s overthrow in 2011 on behalf of the CIA. Haftar now commands the Libyan Army. Neither Haftar nor the counter-parliament in Tripoli has recognised the legitimacy of the as-Sarraj government.

Since Saturday, al-Ghweil and his followers have gone to ground. As the ruler of Tripoli, he had previously opposed the arrival of as-Sarraj with all means at his disposal. He had imposed a state of emergency on the city and closed the airport. Then he had demanded as-Sarraj either surrender or return to Tunisia. He called him an "illegal intruder" who wanted to subordinate the country to international forces.

By necessity, as-Sarraj had to hole up in the naval base at Abu Sittah since all the roads to Tripoli were blocked. From there, in his first government statement, he promised to lead the country in a struggle against ISIS, respect Sharia Law and reopen the Libyan central bank.

For its part, the central bank issued a statement welcoming the as-Sarraj government as the "start of a new era". It called for "the production and export of oil and gas" to be restarted. A similar statement was issued by the National Oil Company.

In the meantime, in Tripoli, the shooting and bloody battles between the rival militias intensified. On the night following as-Sarraj's arrival, at least one man was killed. Militias supporting the counter-government stormed the Qatar-financed broadcaster Nabaa, closing it down. Schools and public facilities remained closed.

Like the US in Kabul in 2001 or Baghdad in 2003, Italy and the European Union now confront the problem of needing a militarily-secured "Green Zone" for their puppet regime in Tripoli. But to do this they only have recourse to a few forces in Libya. As the *Intercept* has exposed, a private mercenary outfit headed by Blackwater founder Erik Prince has already offered its services.

A Libyan military unit from Misrata has declared its support for the new government. Its fighters are in the pay of the Italian government and are protecting oil extraction facilities owned by the Italian oil company ENI in western Libya. Italy has never shut down its oil and gas extraction in Libya.

The Western powers are not choosy in their alleged fight against Islamic State, relying on other extremist Islamic forces. The criteria are not "Western values," as is typically claimed, but exclusively the willingness to collaborate with the imperialists. The militias are paid using the remains of Libya's state finances, which have sat in frozen bank accounts in Europe since the overthrow of Gaddafi.

Significantly, the list of 32 ministers in as-Sarraj's new government contains four people who are regarded as Islamic fundamentalists since they belong either to the Muslim Brotherhood or the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). The founder of the LIFG, Abdel Hakim Belhadj, is a former al-Qaida fighter and confidante of Osama bin Laden. As the blogger Angelika Gutschke revealed in the newspaper *Freitag*, the UN negotiator Martin Kobler met with Belhadj in Turkey to discuss the formation of a new government.

Upon his arrival in Libya, the US, the European Union, Italy, Germany, France and the UK congratulated as-Sarraj and

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immediately recognised his government as the "only legitimate representative of Libya". German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressly welcomed the "unity government". On the fringes of a meeting in Uzbekistan, he called for "all political forces in the country" to support the new government in Tripoli.

The EU has imposed sanctions against Libyan politicians like al-Ghweil for fighting against as-Sarraj, also imposing a travel ban to the EU and freezing his European bank accounts.

Following as-Sarraj's imposition, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Aylrault spoke expressly in favour of an intervention: "We must be prepared to react if the unity government of Fayiz as-Sarraj asks for help, if necessary on the military front."

The Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni demanded all those holding power in Libya to quickly recognise the new government, otherwise threatening that the "international community" would intervene with military strikes all the more rapidly. The Italian Parliamentary Speaker Laura Boldrini, a party colleague of Left Ecology Freedom's Nichi Vendola, also did not oppose air strikes, but merely tied them to the demand that "there must be a unity government, which asks for an intervention."

Such an intervention has been in the works for more than a year. In mid-March, Italian Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti confirmed that plans for an intervention have existed for over a year. Italy would head a UN mission with up to 6,000 soldiers, which would be supported by air strikes from airbases at Trapani and Sigonella in Sicily.

Dozens of Italian Special Forces, from the military and intelligence agencies, have been active in Libya for weeks, working alongside military "specialists" from Britain, France and the US. A February 10 decision of the Italian government places the Italian forces in Libya under the direct control of the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

When as-Sarraj landed in Tripoli, Renzi was attending the summit on nuclear security in Washington. Above all, President Barack Obama spoke there in favour of an intervention, since the installation of as-Sarraj could at best "strengthen the structure" of the Libyan state.

The Italian elites are pushing to play a leading role in any military mission. Under the headline "Libya: Preparing for intervention," the right-wing newspaper *Centro-Destra* wrote that military control of the Mediterranean was of crucial importance, saying this time Italy must play a leading role. It was a priority to avoid "Italian interests being ignored in Libya. ... In other words: If Italy had only a minor role and not the role of the protagonist, then everything would be in vain. That would be the farce of the 2011 tragedy."

In the daily *Corriere della Sera*, the US Ambassador in Rome, John Phillips, demanded the deployment of up to 5,000 Italian soldiers. He said, "Libya is a top priority for Italy, and is also very relevant for us. It is important that Italy takes the lead of an international action."

In contrast, the vast majority of the Italian population rejects military intervention in Libya. Even *Centro-Destra* had to admit: "The shadow standing over the whole thing is that a survey recently showed that 81 percent of citizens are against any kind of intervention."

The imperialist powers are exploiting the chaos that they themselves have created as a pretext for a massive intervention. Five years ago, the pretext was that civilians in Benghazi had to be saved from an impending massacre by Gaddafi's army. As a result, approximately 30,000 fell victim to the NATO military operation. Gaddafi was murdered in a lynch mob, Libya's civilization, economy and infrastructure were destroyed, approximately two million Libyans were forced into exile and hundreds of thousands became displaced persons inside their own country.

According to the *Economist*, Libya is the state "with the world's fastest shrinking economy in 2016". Oil production is at an all-time low; the infrastructure has collapsed. The Libyan Dinar is at its lowest level since its introduction, and many banks are closed. Prices are rising constantly. One third of the Libyan population of six million lives in poverty, and one million people suffer from hunger.

In the 2011 war, NATO unleashed Islamist fighters as proxies and ground forces, and supplied them with weapons, partly through Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. They thus laid the foundation for today's rival militias, and also for the development and advance of ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya itself.

The Islamic fundamentalists were first armed and supported against Gaddafi. Later, with vast quantities of arms from Gaddafi's arsenals, they were deployed to Syria where they fought against Assad. Since 2015, ISIS fighters have begun returning to Libya, where they now serve the Western powers as the pretext for a new intervention.

Every city that put up resistance to the Islamists was bombed to the ground by NATO fighter jets. For example, Sirte, the birthplace of Gaddafi, which put up the longest resistance to the NATO war, was so badly damaged that ISIS was able to easily capture it last year.

The Italian government has also named as a further *casus belli* the halting of the desperate flight of refugees from the imperialist wars in the Middle East and North Africa to Europe through Libya, or, as it is euphemistically referred to in official circles, the "fight against criminal traffickers."

In an interview that was published prominently in several newspapers, Interior Minister Angelino Alfano said, "For Italy, the stability of Libya is not only decisive with regard to the anti-IS fight, but also for the issue of immigration, because over ninety percent of the ships start from there."

Following the closure of the so-called Balkan route, it is expected that once again refugees will undertake the dangerous passage across the Mediterranean to Europe. It is estimated that some 500,000 to 800,000 people have crossed the Sahara during the winter months in order to reach Libya, where they are now waiting for warmer weather to make the treacherous trip across the Mediterranean in hopes of reaching Europe.

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