

Libya on the brink of all-out civil war

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As troops and tanks of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) of “Field Marshal” Khalifa Haftar advance on the capital of Tripoli, the internal conflicts that have been ripping the North African country apart are dramatically intensifying.

Advancing from its base in the east, the LNA has captured the abandoned international airport south of the capital. On Monday, it carried out bombing raids against the country’s sole functioning airport in Tripoli’s eastern suburbs.

The Pentagon responded on Sunday to the threatened siege of the city of 1.2 million people by withdrawing its military personnel by sea. The chief of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, said that the “security realities on the ground in Libya are growing increasingly complex and unpredictable.” He added that the US military command in Africa would “continue to remain agile in support of existing US strategy.”

Whether the withdrawal signals US acquiescence to Haftar’s offensive or the preparations for American airstrikes against his forces remains to be seen.

Haftar, a former general in the Libyan army, turned against the government of Muammar Gaddafi in the late 1980s after becoming a prisoner of war during a conflict with neighboring Chad. He was quickly picked up by the US Central Intelligence Agency and remained a CIA “asset” for decades, taking up residence near the agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia and becoming a US citizen.

Sent back to Libya in advance of the 2011 regime-change operation mounted by Washington, Paris and London, he was overshadowed by the Islamist Al Qaeda-linked forces that served as ground troops for the US-NATO air war, which ended up claiming the lives of as many as 50,000 Libyan civilians.

Unable to find a path to power, Haftar went back to the US, returning to Libya to mount a bloody campaign in 2014 to seize control of the eastern city of Benghazi from Islamist militias. He formed a military force comprised of

various militias, which became the backbone of a regime based in the eastern city of Tobruk. His government has rivaled the US- and UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli, chaired by wealthy businessman Fayez al-Sarraj. A third rival for state power is the Islamist-dominated General National Congress, which proclaimed itself a Salvation Government and rejected Sarraj’s authority.

Before his advance on Tripoli, Haftar managed to establish control in the summer of 2018 over oil facilities in central Libya, and, earlier this year, over a swathe of southern Libya that includes one of the country’s major oil fields.

Casualties in the latest fighting reportedly include nearly 50 dead and over 80 wounded, while thousands of civilians have been forced to flee their homes. If Haftar’s forces enter the city, there is danger of a bloodbath and massive destruction, as disparate militia groups have vowed to resist Tripoli’s takeover.

Humanitarian aid groups have warned of the threat to civilian lives and called particular attention to the fate of thousands of refugees being held against their will under appalling conditions in detention camps run by the militias that back Sarraj’s regime. The Libyan Coast Guard is lavishly funded and advised by the European imperialist powers, who utilize it in their efforts to halt the flow of refugees to Europe. It turns migrants over to the militias, which subject them to torture, rape, abuse and summary execution, while attempting to extract ransoms from their relatives.

Haftar has enjoyed open support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, while France has provided covert backing, including military advisers. Italy and Qatar have backed the Tripoli-based regime.

While US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement declaring that “we oppose the military offensive of Khalifa Haftar’s forces and urge the immediate halt to these military operations against the Libyan capital,” Washington has established the closest alliance with the general’s principal backers in the Arab world, Saudi

Arabia and Egypt. The latter's dictator, Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, is to receive a red-carpet welcome at the White House today.

On Friday, the United Nations Security Council, following a closed-door meeting, issued a statement to the press calling for Haftar's LNA to "halt its military activity" near Tripoli. When Britain proposed a formal resolution along these lines, however, Russia opposed it, no doubt fearing that it could become the pretext for a fresh Western intervention in Libya.

The British draft included a passage calling "for those who undermine Libya's peace and security to be held to account."

What hypocrisy! There was no such call when the UK joined with France and the United States to overthrow the country's government and inflict death upon its population and destruction upon its infrastructure. No one, from Barack Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron on down, was ever held accountable for a criminal war of aggression that turned the country into a living hell.

Launched under the pretext of a UN resolution authorizing the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya to halt the supposed (but non-existent) threat of a massacre in the eastern city of Benghazi, the war saw money and arms poured into Islamist militias and lavished on Al Qaeda operatives, who were backed by a relentless bombing campaign, which included nearly 30,000 sorties in the course of seven months.

A war launched on the pretext of protecting civilians culminated in the carpet bombing of Sirte, a bastion of popular support for Gaddafi, and the lynch-mob torture and murder of the Libyan leader, over which then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laughingly gloated, "We came, we saw, he died."

In the intervening eight years, the attempts to install a pro-Western puppet regime in a devastated country controlled by clashing Islamist, tribal and other militias have failed miserably. The regime headed up by Sarraj, recognized as Libya's "legitimate" government, barely controls even Tripoli. Under its supposed rule, the country's education and health systems have collapsed, while inflation is ravaging living standards, the unemployment rate has reached 30 percent, and fully a third of the population lives below the poverty line. Conditions of life for masses of Libyans have deteriorated dramatically since the overthrow of Gaddafi.

In addition to the leaders of the major imperialist powers, which intervened to assert control over the largest

oil reserves on the African continent, those who should be held to account include a whole layer of pseudo-left parties and spokesmen who echoed and amplified the imperialist pretexts of intervening to save lives (code-named R2P: Responsibility to Protect) and even to defend a "Libyan revolution."

Thus, Gilbert Achcar, the academic and prominent member of the French New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), insisted that the defense of the "Libyan revolution" was the paramount issue, and declared that "You can't in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians."

Similarly, the University of Michigan professor Juan Cole, whose "left" credentials stemmed from his limited opposition to the Iraq war, declared, "To make 'anti-imperialism' trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions." He added, "If NATO needs me, I'm there."

Similar arguments were advanced by, among others, the recently dissolved International Socialist Organization (ISO) in support of the even more bloody US regime change-operation in Syria.

These forces, expressing the interests of privileged layers of the middle class, are totally exposed by the reality of Libya eight years after an intervention that was supposed to protect lives and promote "revolution."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: "Far from a 'revolution' or struggle for 'liberation,' what the world is witnessing is the rape of Libya by a syndicate of imperialist powers determined to lay hold of its oil wealth and turn its territory into a neo-colonial base of operations for further interventions throughout the Middle East and North Africa."

With the latest escalation of Libya's protracted civil war—between rival forces that are all the products of CIA conspiracies and imperialist interventions—the consequences of this rape and the political criminality of those who justified and promoted it have become all the more evident.



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