

# EU agrees to new military mission against Libya

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The foreign ministers of all 27 EU countries agreed to launch a new military mission in Libya on Monday. In order to enforce the arms embargo agreed in Berlin in January, the EU intends to deploy warships and planes in the region together with satellites.

The military operation will not only escalate the war that has devastated Libya since the military alliance led by the United States, France and Great Britain bombed the Mediterranean country in 2011 and murdered its long-time ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi. The intervention also threatens to expand into an all-out war between the major and regional powers backing the rival militias in Libya.

The German government had invited the 16 powers and parties involved in the Libya conflict to a conference in Berlin on January 19, where they signed a 55-point plan that included a ceasefire, compliance with the UN arms embargo, the withdrawal of foreign armies and mercenaries, and the demobilisation of the various militias fighting one other.

The WSWs warned at the time that the conference was pursuing imperialist goals and was “only the preliminary step to a military occupation of the country.” We compared the Libya conference to the Berlin Congo conference of 1884, which played a major role in deepening Africa's colonial domination and exacerbated tensions between the imperialist powers. These warnings have already been confirmed.

The conflict in Libya has only escalated since the Berlin conference as every party to the war seeks to gain advantage. The agreed ceasefire has been broken more than 150 times, and deliveries of weapons have skyrocketed. Huge quantities of arms have been transported to Libya by ship, plane and over land. “The arms embargo is a joke,” said Stephanie Williams, the UN special envoy for Libya.

Brussels and Berlin have used the situation as an opportunity to advance their interests militarily in the oil-

rich country, which is important for access to Africa as a whole. If Europe cannot agree to enforce the arms embargo by military means, “we run the risk of becoming irrelevant,” EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell wrote in a memo. In that case other powers would continue to shape developments in Libya “in a way that does not take our interests into account.”

There were disagreements in the EU over the issue of how to prevent warships deployed to the Mediterranean from taking on board shipwrecked refugees, which they are obliged to do under maritime law. A previous EU Mediterranean mission, Operation Sophia, which was originally supposed to combat smugglers and destroy their boats, was discontinued in September 2019 after its vessels had helped rescue 730,000 refugees over four years.

Austria, Hungary and Italy in particular insisted that this should not happen again. Therefore, the EU agreed to deploy warships in the eastern Mediterranean, where there are hardly any escape routes to Europe, but which is a route for the transport of weapons to Libya.

If the warships are nevertheless in a position to rescue refugees, the mission can be stopped immediately. “If pull factors (i.e. factors encouraging migrants to take to the sea in the hope of being rescued and taken to Europe) regarding migration are identified, the maritime elements will be withdrawn,” according to the agreement of the EU foreign ministers.

There is a “basic consensus” that what is required is “a military mission and not a humanitarian mission,” commented the Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg proudly.

How the EU intends to stop arms supplies without waging war against NATO allies or key trading partners remains unclear.

The most important weapons supplier to the “official” government of Fayiz as-Sarradsch, which controls the

capital city of Tripoli, is Turkey, which in turn arms its allies in Libya by ship across the Mediterranean.

As-Sarradsch's main rival, General Khalifa Haftar, receives weapons over land from Egypt and via air from Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Haftar is also supported by Russia. According to *SpiegelOnline*, a huge transport plane takes off almost every day from Abu Dhabi heading for Benghazi, where Haftar's headquarters are located.

The Turkish government, which is already in conflict with EU members Greece and Cyprus over gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean, would hardly allow the EU to intervene against Turkish ships. "Without a robust control of suspect shipping by NATO warships in the Mediterranean, the lethal supplies will not be reduced," commented the German weekly *Die Zeit*. The consequences will be even more devastating should the EU shoot down a transport plane supplying Haftar with weapons.

Ultimately, the deployment of a new naval mission to the Mediterranean is only a first step in the military occupation of Libya as part of a new "scramble for Africa." EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell had already raised this prospect in January. "The key issue is to enforce our interests more powerfully and, when necessary, in a robust manner," he told *Der Spiegel*. "If there is a ceasefire in Libya, then the EU must be ready to help implement and monitor this ceasefire—possibly with the use of soldiers, for example as part of an EU mission."

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