

Bombing of Turkey's Watiya base escalates Franco-Italian proxy war in Libya

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Even as COVID-19 spreads, the decade-long civil war between rival imperialist-backed warlords triggered by the 2011 NATO war in Libya is spiraling out of control.

On July 5, unidentified warplanes bombed al-Watiya airbase, which Italian-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) forces recently retook from French-backed Libyan National Army (LNA) forces of Khalifa Haftar. The attack damaged hangars and destroyed military equipment from Turkey, which is coordinating its support for the GNA with Italy. LNA official Khaled al Mahjoub told Al Arabiya that “other attacks similar to the one on the base will soon be carried out. ... We are in a real war with Turkey, which has oil ambitions in Libya.”

Turkish military sources told Spanish news site Atalayar the raid included “nine precision air strikes against Turkish air defense systems,” which wounded several Turkish intelligence officials. They added that the attacks were “successful” and left “three radars completely destroyed.” However, Atalayar refuted reports that MiG-29 or Su-24 jets Moscow has given the LNA carried out the strikes, saying that it was the work of French-made Rafale jets.

Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and France itself all field Rafales, support the LNA, and could have bombed al-Watiya. On June 21, Egyptian dictator General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi threatened to intervene in Libya against Turkey.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's office reacted to the strike by tweeting that Turkey would escalate operations in Libya, attacking the coastal city of Sirte and Al Jufra, Libya's largest airbase, both located in central Libya and held by LNA forces. It cited control of oil supply lines and Russian support for the LNA to justify its intervention.

The bombing of al-Watiya, barely 150km from Tripoli, followed visits by Turkish and Italian officials. It came only a few hours after Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar concluded a trip to Tripoli, during which he proclaimed, “Turkish sovereignty and our return, after the withdrawal of our ancestors, to return forever in Libya.” This apparently referred to the Turkish Ottoman Empire's control over Libya, until Italy seized Libya and held it as a colony from 1911 until 1943 and its defeat during World War II.

On June 24, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio visited Tripoli, after meeting with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Ankara and amid joint Turkish-Italian naval drills. In Tripoli, he said the war was central to Rome's strategic interests, calling Libya “a priority for our foreign policy and national security.”

The strike on al-Watiya has revealed the bitter divisions among the NATO imperialist powers, as well as between the regional powers, over the division of the spoils from the 2011 war.

Amid revolutionary uprisings of the working class in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, Paris, London and Washington pushed NATO to bomb Libya and arm Islamist and tribal militias to topple Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Berlin declined to join the war, and the belligerent powers ran roughshod over initial Turkish objections. Western media and petty-bourgeois pseudo-left groups like France's New Anti-capitalist Party claimed it was a humanitarian war to protect Libyan protesters, but it was an imperialist rape of Libya.

It set the stage not only for the ongoing proxy war in Syria between Russia and NATO, which sent to Syria many Islamist proxy militias it had mobilized in Libya, but for a ruthless struggle to carve up Libya and its massive oil reserves.

Thousands have died in fighting between rival militias unleashed by the 2011 war, and the coronavirus pandemic is now ravaging Libya. The number of cases doubled in the last two weeks of June, to 713, and now stands at 1,117. Only 269 have recovered while 34 have died, as the disease spreads across a country whose health and industrial infrastructure have been shattered by a decade of bloodshed.

This month, the International Rescue Committee reported: “This year Libya has recorded the highest number of attacks on health facilities of any country in the world. Just yesterday, an ambulance was hit by an airstrike, severely damaging the vehicle and the health facility close by. Last week two doctors were killed by a mine that exploded under a body they were moving from a hospital. With Libya’s health system already on its knees, continued attacks such as these are making it even harder for medical teams in the country to respond to the pandemic.”

The NATO powers are not bringing medical and humanitarian aid, however, but plundering Libya and threatening to escalate the fighting into an all-out regional war. Several regional powers play a major role—with Turkey and Algeria backing the GNA, and Egypt and the UAE backing the LNA. Moscow has also intervened to back the LNA against the Islamist-dominated GNA. However, a decisive aspect of the conflict is between major oil corporations like France’s Total and Italy’s ENI.

On July 3, Turkey’s Anadolu news agency wrote that the GNA is “advancing on Sirte, the gateway to the east of the country and oil fields.” It called Sirte “crucial” for two reasons: “First, Sirte has significant economic value as a gateway to Libya’s oil crescent region, consisting of vital ports such as al-Zuweyatinah, Ra’s Lanuf, Marsa al Brega, and as-Sidr, which reportedly supplies 60 percent of Libya’s oil exports. Secondly, it is a strategic city that could enable the GNA to take control of the Libyan coastline from the capital to the west and Benghazi to the east.”

ENI dominates the oilfields in GNA-held northwestern Libya. But many of the oil reserves and refineries in the “oil crescent” region are held by Total and LNA militias in the Cyrenaica region around Benghazi, the center of the NATO-backed revolt against Gaddafi, and in the Fezzan. This region in southern Libya borders two former French colonies,

Niger and Tchad, that Paris exerts control over as part of its so-called war on terror in Mali and the Sahel.

Conflicts between the NATO imperialist powers are increasingly evident. Commenting on French support for Haftar, Tarek Megerisi of the European Council on Foreign Relations told the Financial Times: “France has different interests to Germany and Italy in Libya, and it has moved to protect these interests. It has security interests in the Sahel and a wider security partnership that it is building with the United Arab Emirates—and in which Egypt is a big part.”

Dorothee Schmid of the French Institute on International Relations (IFRI) said there is “strategic panic” in Paris at Haftar’s recently suffered reverses. She pointed to growing chaos and uncertainty in NATO: “France is rather isolated in this affair, and everyone is waiting for the American elections.”

The only way to avert a further escalation is a mobilization of the working class in Africa and the Middle East, resuming the struggles launched a decade ago, and the unification of these struggles with growing strikes and protests in America and Europe in a socialist anti-war movement. Absent a revolutionary intervention of the working class, the ruling elites are all sliding towards war.

Naval tensions continue to grow in the Mediterranean. France withdrew from NATO operations in the Mediterranean on July 1, protesting that a Turkish warship allegedly threatened to fire on a French frigate as it tried to inspect a merchant ship bound for Libya. Egypt has for its part reportedly acquired a Russian “Bastion” coastal defense battery amid reports that Turkey intends to set up a naval base in the Libyan city of Misrata.



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