

As Libyan Rebels Close in on Gaddafi, US and Europe Ramp Up Intervention

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With dictator Muammar Gaddafi's control over the country ebbing, the United States and its European allies are stepping up their intervention into the Libyan crisis. Their aim is to ensure that any new regime will be equally subservient to their economic and geostrategic interests.

Behind the rhetoric about democracy and humanitarian concerns, Washington and the European powers are seeking to exploit the brutality of Gaddafi to condition public opinion to accept a colonial-style intervention and the reassertion of imperialist control over the country's oil fields.

Over the weekend, Gaddafi's hold on power was further eroded by the defection of additional political and military figures and the capture of more key cities by the opposition. Most significant was the fall to the rebels of Zawiyah, an oil port and refinery city thirty miles to the west of the capital, Tripoli. The capture of Zawiyah signified the spread of the rebellion, heretofore centered in the east of the country, to the west.

Although Gaddafi's army has reportedly surrounded Zawiyah, as of early Monday it had not attempted to retake the town of 200,000 people. The areas remaining under the dictator's control have reportedly been reduced to Tripoli and Gaddafi's hometown of Sirte.

Gaddafi's dwindling domain has only accelerated the imperialist drive to intervene, including by military means. Over the weekend, the British military carried out two raids into the Libyan desert to transport British nationals out of the country. The first, carried out Saturday by SAS special forces using Hercules planes, rescued 150 people, mostly British oil workers, and flew them to Malta. The second, on Sunday, involved three Royal Air Force planes and picked up another 150 civilians.

On Sunday, the German military carried out its own raid. Two military planes landed on a private runway belonging to the Wintershall AG company, evacuating 22 Germans and 112 others and flying them to Crete.

These raids mark the first open use of military assets in the Libyan crisis, but they are likely to be followed by more aggressive actions. There are growing calls in the US and Europe for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya, to be policed to US warplanes, and other military measures to aid the anti-Gaddafi forces.

The main concern in Washington is the prospect of either a protracted civil war, which would

further inflame world oil prices and destabilize other oil-producing dictatorships in North Africa and the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, or a political vacuum over which the US would exert little influence.

The New York Times published a front-page article Sunday under the headline “The Vacuum After Qaddafi.” The article noted that the US exerts far less control over the Libyan army and other institutions than it does in Egypt and Tunisia, and ended by suggesting the possibility of a military occupation under the cover of humanitarian needs.

“Some experts,” the Times wrote, “wonder if Libya might become the first experiment in the use of the ‘responsibility to protect’—the idea that a United Nations force would be deployed to prevent civilian deaths in the event of widespread violence...”

“With the country now split badly between east and west, an outside protection force would lend time for Tripoli to reassert itself as the capital and establish control.”

A raft of measures have been taken over the past several days by the US and Europe to isolate Gaddafi and pave the way for a major military intervention. After announcing Friday the closure of the US embassy in Tripoli and the imposition of unilateral US sanctions, President Obama on Saturday for the first time called for Gaddafi to resign. The White House published an account of a telephone call to German Chancellor Angela Merkel in which Obama called for Gaddafi to “leave now.”

Obama is to meet Monday in Washington with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to discuss further actions against the Libyan regime. Secretary Hillary Clinton is to speak in Geneva before the UN Human Rights Council, which over the weekend voted unanimously to suspend Libya’s membership.

The United Nations Security Council on Saturday unanimously passed a resolution imposing economic sanctions on Libya and referring Gaddafi and his key aides for prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO secretary general, held an emergency meeting of NATO ambassadors on Friday to discuss possible military assistance for evacuation efforts.

The British Guardian newspaper on Saturday cited unconfirmed reports that former Prime Minister Tony Blair had telephoned Gaddafi warning that NATO troops might be sent in. The claims were made by one of Gaddafi’s sons, Saadi, in a telephone interview from Tripoli.

The New York Times on Saturday quoted Tom Malinowski, the director of the Washington office of Human Rights Watch, as saying, “Even if people aren’t explicitly talking about no-fly zones, the fact that NATO met today suggests there is more on people’s minds than diplomacy... I sense military contingencies are on the table.” Malinowski has participated in White House meetings on the Libyan crisis.

The Financial Times on Saturday wrote that European officials have raised the possibility of armed rescues of the thousands of EU nationals still stranded in Libya. The newspaper quoted a “senior EU official” as saying: “It’s one of the possibilities we’re working on. We are in contact with EU member states to see whether their facilities, civilian and military, can be deployed for this.”

In taped interviews from Cairo broadcast on Sunday's television talk shows, Republican Senator John McCain and Independent Senator Joseph Lieberman—who was the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000—attacked Obama for not going far enough in Libya. They called for a no-fly zone and military aid to the opposition.

The two noted that while the US had sent only a ferry to collect American civilians, Britain had sent a warship and Hercules aircraft.

Later on Sunday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested the administration was open to such moves, declaring that it was “reaching out” to opposition groups and was prepared to offer “any kind of assistance” to Libyans seeking to overthrow the regime.

The crocodile tears being shed by the US and its European allies over Gaddafi's atrocities against protesters are utterly cynical. For days Obama and his European counterparts were silent over the massacres carried out by Gaddafi in Benghazi, Tripoli and other cities. Having established the closest relations with the regime over the past decade, which had allowed them free rein to once again exploit Libya's oil resources, they hoped that Gaddafi would be able to quickly crush the uprising and restore order.

Only when it became clear that was not about to happen and the crisis began to seriously disrupt oil production and spark a panic rise in global market prices did they shift gears and denounce their former ally. Obama, Clinton, Sarkozy and company had all feted the dictator in recent months, following Tony Blair's 2004 “deal in the sand” with Gaddafi and the Bush administration's restoration of full diplomatic relations in 2008.

They had conveniently dropped the issue of Gaddafi's role in the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which crashed in Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 innocent civilians, mainly Americans. Exposing the fraud of the “war on terror” and its function as a cover for the aggressive pursuit of US imperialist interests around the world, Washington converted the former “mad dog” and “rogue” into an ally in the anti-terror cause and force for stability in the region.

Only last November, the International Monetary Fund issued a glowing report on Libya, praising the regime for its aggressive pursuit of neoliberal, pro-market policies. The IMF praised Gaddafi's “continued efforts to modernize and diversify the economy,” commending in particular “efforts to enhance the role of the private sector in the economy.” These very policies led to mounting economic hardship for the working class and rural poor, fueling the social anger that erupted earlier this month.

Gaddafi is a criminal who deserves to be brought to justice, but none of the imperialist leaders currently denouncing him have any standing to point the finger elsewhere. They are all complicit in wars of aggression and colonial-style occupations that have killed hundreds of thousands of people in Iraq and Afghanistan and are implicated in all of the attendant crimes, including torture, rendition and indefinite detention.

The staggering hypocrisy of the US government is summed up by the fact that it supports bringing Gaddafi before the International Criminal Court, but refuses to sign on to the court and rejects its authority over Americans. It asserts the right of US officials to commit war crimes with impunity.

In the UN Security Council resolution against Libya passed Saturday, the US insisted on a

clause declaring that people from countries not signed up to the International Criminal Court could not be punished by it for crimes in the Libyan attacks. American officials insisted on the paragraph to prevent setting a precedent for prosecution by the ICC of American soldiers and officials.

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