

Escalation of the Conflict: NATO Takes Command of the War on Libya

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Global Research, April 03, 2011

[Stop NATO](#) 3 April 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On the morning of March 31 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization assumed full command of military operations against Libya, effecting the transfer of air, naval and preliminary ground operations from U.S. Africa Command's Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn to NATO's Operation Unified Protector. In NATO's words, "The Alliance has the assets in place to conduct its tasks under Operation Unified Protector – the arms embargo, no-fly zone and actions to protect civilians and civilian centres."

On the same day a press conference was conducted by NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu, the commander of Unified Protector Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard and the chairman of NATO's Military Committee Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola to announce the transition.

Romania's Lungescu (a veteran of BBC World Service), Quebec's Bouchard and Italy's Di Paola spoke entirely in English, as notwithstanding NATO's formal command of Libyan war operations Bouchard reports to America's Admiral James Stavridis, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe and also the chief of the Pentagon's European Command, and NATO is after all a U.S.-controlled military alliance. One speaks to a master in his language.

The day after NATO took over control of the war Stavridis asserted that "the Libyan operation demonstrates just how capable the Western alliance remains two decades after the end of the Cold War," in the words of an Associated Press dispatch. The news agency added that "This is the first time in its history that NATO is engaged in two major conflicts at once," meaning the wars in Libya and Afghanistan, in Africa and Asia.

The day before NATO assumed command of the North African war, Stavridis told the House Armed Services Committee that the war in Afghanistan "has become a global effort, with committed partners from nations that include Mongolia, Bulgaria, Tonga and El Salvador." He referred to 49 nations contributing troops for NATO's International Security Assistance Force, one more than has been acknowledged before, with El Salvador evidently the latest. There are also military personnel assigned to NATO in Afghanistan from countries that are not yet official Troop Contributing Nations like Bahrain, Colombia, Egypt, Japan and Kazakhstan. Never before have armed forces from so many nations been stationed in a war zone in a single country.

Stavridis, who as NATO's top military commander is in ultimate charge of both current wars, made the latter comments in an address commemorating the 60th anniversary of NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons, Belgium, which "was set up by NATO's then-commander and later U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower" as Associated Press reminded its readers.

On March 21, hours after NATO launched Operation Unified Protector, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen also addressed the House Armed Services Committee on Libya. Later Gates appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee and confirmed that U.S. warplanes would remain in the Libyan war theater to assist the new NATO mission.

Referring to the twelve days of Operation Odyssey Dawn, he said: "That part of our mission is complete and successful."

He further boasted of Western bombs and cruise missiles destroying Libyan air capabilities and ground assets – the second category includes administrative buildings, oil depots, ammunition dumps and naval facilities – and affirmed that the intensive onslaught "will not diminish under NATO leadership."

And indeed it hasn't. On the third day of Unified Protector, April 2, NATO announced that it had conducted 174 air missions over Libya on the preceding day, including 74 strike sorties, ones involving bombing missions and missile strikes. The total for the first two days of the NATO operation were 363 sorties and 148 strike sorties.

In his testimony on March 1, Secretary Gates also said: "A decision about support to the opposition is clearly the next step. I think all members of the coalition are thinking about that at this point."

NATO Military Committee chief Admiral Paola was more candid, stating that he was "confident, absolutely confident, that one of the (NATO) allies" has already been arming anti-government insurgents in Libya.

Gates offered the standard official explanation of the ongoing war as being actuated by alleged humanitarian concerns and disavowed a formal policy of regime change, but gave the lie to his own words in adding that NATO forces "will continue to attack (Gadhafi's) ground forces with no opportunity for resupply" to the point where "His military is going to face the question of whether they are prepared to be destroyed by air attacks, or if it's time for him to go."

In addition, according to the Pentagon's website: "The issue is more complicated than simply arming the rebels. What the opposition really needs, Gates said, is organization, training, and command and control – something he said likely requires coalition forces on the ground in Libya." He refrained from openly endorsing that strategy although it is already being implemented with American and British special forces and intelligence operatives directing air strikes from the ground in Libya.

Gates warned against the alternative to an overthrow of the government and ground operations while speaking in the House earlier, saying "We have considered the possibility of this being a stalemate and being a drawn-out affair...where you achieve the military goal but not achieve the political goal" of regime change.

Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Howard McKeon cautioned that NATO "could be expected to support a decade-long no-fly zone enforcement like the one over Iraq in the 1990s," a further incentive for entertaining the alternative – or complementary – option of staging a ground war.

A recent poll demonstrated 47 percent of Americans in opposition to the military operation in Libya with 41 supporting it. The same survey, conducted by Quinnipiac University, shows that by a two-to-one majority, 58-29 percent, Americans feel that President Obama has not clearly and convincingly presented an argument for U.S. involvement.

Pressure will be applied on the public to support a prospective invasion of Libya employing the same rationale used for the ongoing air war: The need for an alleged humanitarian intervention.

Modeled after the calls by the likes of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Wesley Clark during the 1999 war against Yugoslavia, a ground invasion will be presented as a humane remedy for the death and destruction not so much exacerbated as caused by an air campaign.

And there is no lack of Libyans being killed and wounded by the current one.

The Vatican's senior representative (vicar apostolic) in Libya, Bishop Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, recently decried the fact that NATO air attacks "are killing dozens of civilians."

He added that "In the Tajoura neighborhood [of the Libyan capital, Tripoli], around 40 civilians were killed, and a house with a family inside collapsed."

In early March Bishop Martinelli had pleaded against the "further spilling of blood" in the country, warning against outside intervention and saying any attempt at a military resolution of the Libyan crisis would only escalate the level of violence.

On April 1 it was announced that a NATO air strike killed seven Libyan civilians, including three girls from one family, and injured 25 in the village of Zawia el Argobe.

On the same day Western warplanes strafed areas east and southwest of Tripoli.

An Associated Press correspondent interviewed the mother and uncle of an 18-month-old boy killed by a NATO air strike in the village of Khorum on March 29.

The mother said, "His blood was streaming down my arm." The uncle added: "We took him to the hospital where they treated him for...burns and some broken bones. But by nightfall he was dead."

On April 2 a spokesman for the Libyan opposition reported that a NATO air strike had killed 13 rebels and wounded at least a score more, adding that the "collateral damage" was "an unfortunate accident." Evidently being killed by Western bombers is more humane than being killed in a firefight with government forces.

Far more Libyans stand to be killed and injured in what NATO has announced will be at least a 90-day campaign.

To indicate the probable true duration, and the scope, of the war, NATO spokesperson Lungescu said at the press conference on March 31 that the North Atlantic Council, the military bloc's highest decision-making body consisting of the permanent representatives (ambassadors) of its 28 member states, had met the day before to discuss the transfer of the war's command to the Alliance.

She also said that the North Atlantic Council met with representatives of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative “and other partners around the globe.”

She added that “I can tell you it was a big room and the room was full.”

The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council includes all 28 full NATO members and the 22 affiliates of its Partnership for Peace program:

Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia, Georgia, Finland, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue partners are Libya’s neighbors Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia and Israel, Jordan, Mauritania and Morocco.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative’s members are Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – the last two providing warplanes for NATO’s Operation Unified Protector – with Oman and Saudi Arabia next in line to join.

After NATO led a conference in London on March 29 to plan for a “post-Gaddafi” Libya along the lines of such precedents as Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the bloc’s Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen celebrated the creation of a Contact Group on Libya and stated “NATO has long-standing relations with partner countries from the region, notably through its Mediterranean Dialogue programme and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.”

Two days later Rasmussen delivered an address in Stockholm titled “The New NATO and Sweden’s security” in which he stated:

“NATO welcomes contributions from all its partners across the world to ensure that the will of the international community is heard....We have extensive experience of involving partner nations in our operations – partners such as Sweden, but also partners in the Mediterranean and Gulf regions.”

“Afghanistan is another example where we can see the value of partnership. 48 countries are now part of the International Stabilisation Force [International Security Assistance Force] ISAF. With one in four UN member states taking part, this is the largest coalition in history. And Sweden is part of it, along with NATO Allies.”

400 Swedish troops serving under NATO in Afghanistan are fighting their country’s first war in 200 years.

On April 2, two days after the NATO chief left the country, Sweden deployed the first three warplanes assigned for NATO’s air operations in Libya with five more leaving the next day.

As with Afghanistan, the war against Libya is being employed by the U.S. and NATO to consolidate military partnerships with nations around the world under wartime conditions.

Russian political analyst Pyotr Iskenderov recently wrote that “A deployment of multinational forces on a long-term basis under the aegis of NATO paves the way for Brussels to bypass the only restriction [against military occupation] imposed by the UN

Security Council on an operation in Libya.”

His compatriot Alexander Karasev added:

“An allegedly humanitarian intervention by NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999 ended with the deployment of NATO forces in Kosovo and the setting up of the largest U.S. [overseas base since the Vietnam war] Camp Bondsteel in the province. The U.S. and NATO may repeat this scenario in Libya.”

As U.S. military vessels are scheduled to depart the Mediterranean Sea, NATO is amassing an imposing array of warplanes and warships to intensify the attack against Libya.

Tallies compiled by Agence France-Presse and Deutsche Presse-Agentur list the following inventory of military assets deployed against Libya:

Britain: 17 Tornado and Typhoon fighter bombers as well as surveillance, reconnaissance and refuelling aircraft and two frigates and a submarine.

France: 36 warplanes. 20 Mirage and Rafale combat planes and the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier with ten Rafale and six Super Etendard attack jets escorted by two frigates, as well as AWACS and refuelling aircraft.

Italy: 16 jets, the Garibaldi aircraft carrier and four other ships as well as seven air and naval bases.

Canada: Eleven fighter jets, patrol and refuelling planes and a frigate.

Belgium: Six F-16 fighter jets and mine-hunting ship.

The Netherlands: Seven jets and a ship.

Turkey: Seven jets, five warships and a submarine.

Norway: Six F-16s.

Denmark: Six F-16s.

Greece: Two jets, a helicopter, a ship and four bases.

Bulgaria: A frigate.

Romania: A frigate and use of an air base.

From NATO partner nations:

Sweden: Eight Gripen fighter jets, a C-130 transport plane and reconnaissance aircraft.

Qatar: Six Mirage fighter jets and two C-17 military transport planes.

United Arab Emirates: Six Mirage jets, six F-16s and one C-17 transport aircraft.

Warplanes from the above nations have launched several hundred ground strikes against Libyan targets already.

NATO's first African war, following its first European and Asian wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan respectively, will be neither short nor limited in scale and intensity.

The new commander of U.S. Africa Command, General Carter Ham, said of the first phase of the war that "We've demonstrated the capability to [lead military operations]."

Now NATO is following suit and escalating the conflict to new and more dangerous heights.

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