French government manoeuvres for resolution to Libyan war

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The French administration of Nicolas Sarkozy appears to be stepping up efforts to strike a deal with the Libyan government aimed at sidelining Muammar Gaddafi and bringing the NATO bombardment of the oil-rich state to a conclusion. The diplomatic manoeuvres reflect the growing crisis confronting the US, France and Britain as their illegal military campaign enters its fifth month without succeeding in its primary objective of forcing regime change in Tripoli.

On Sunday, French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet declared that his government had demanded that the so-called Transitional National Council (TNC), based in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, begin talks with the Gaddafi government.

"The position of the TNC is very far from other positions," Longuet stated, apparently criticising the demand of the "rebels" that Gaddafi quit power before any negotiations. "Now, there will be a need to sit around a table... We [NATO] will stop the bombardment as soon as Libyans speak to each other and the military from both sides go back to their barracks. They can now speak to each other because we are showing them that there is no solution with force."

Longuet pointedly raised the possibility of Gaddafi remaining in office in some capacity, saying he could "be in another room in his palace with another title."

Washington immediately rebuked the French defence minister's remarks, highlighting continued tensions within the NATO alliance. A US State Department spokesperson declared that "there was confusion as to France's position" and insisted that "it is time for Gaddafi to go."

Also on Sunday, the Algerian newspaper *El Khabar* published an interview with Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, who claimed that negotiations were already underway with the French government. "The truth is that we are negotiating with France and not with the rebels," Saif al-Islam said. "Our envoy to Sarkozy said that the French president was very clear, and told him, 'We created the [Transitional National] Council, and without our support, and money, and our weapons, the council would have never existed'. France said: 'When we reach an agreement with you, we will force the council to cease fire'."

Paris denied these claims. It is clear, however, that some discussion is underway. *Le Monde* yesterday reported that Sarkozy had met with Gaddafi's chief of staff, Bachir Saleh, a month ago. The president's office refused to comment on the report.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé separately told France Info radio: "There have indeed

been contacts, but it has not turned into a real negotiation. The Libyan regime is sending messengers everywhere: to Turkey, New York, Paris. We are meeting envoys who say to us: look, 'Gaddafi is ready to go, let's talk about it'."

Juppé added: "There is a consensus on how to end the crisis, which is that Gaddafi has to leave power. That was absolutely not a given two or three months ago."

This "consensus" now includes the African Union, according to the French foreign minister. On Sunday, Juppé visited the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia and afterward declared that leading officials in the body were "closer to the position of France and the coalition than before." The African Union had previously collaborated with the Russian government in calling for an immediate NATO ceasefire and had left open the possibility of Gaddafi remaining in power.

In Paris yesterday, the National Assembly approved continued military operations in Libya, by 482 votes to 27, with deputies from Sarkozy's UMP party and the opposition Parti Socialiste uniting behind the war effort.

Prime Minister François Fillon told the assembly before the vote: "A political solution in Libya is more indispensable than ever and it is beginning to take shape." He offered no detail about the proposed "solution," but insisted that it required "the departure of Colonel Gaddafi from power."

France's diplomatic manoeuvres are consistent with the central strategic objectives of the NATO war on Libya. The campaign has aimed at ousting Gaddafi from power and installing a client administration in Tripoli—largely comprised of senior Gaddafi regime figures—that would facilitate the major oil conglomerates' exploitation of the country's lucrative reserves and also provide Washington and its European allies with a platform from which to extend operations in neighbouring Tunisia, Egypt and across North Africa.

The military campaign, however, has failed to achieve these objectives—despite more than four months of continual bombardment, France's arming of "rebel" fighters, the deployment of special forces and other "advisers" in Benghazi, multiple assassination attempts on Gaddafi and his family, and appeals to Gaddafi's inner circle to turn on their leader. Negotiations are now regarded as a potential way of breaking the military stalemate.

These developments underscore the cynicism of NATO's claims to be fighting for "democracy" in Libya. In reality, the Obama administration and its European partners are working to oust Gaddafi while preserving his repressive security apparatus. An unnamed "senior western diplomat" told the British *Telegraph*: "There is general recognition among western diplomats that the structure of the state existing in the western part of the country should not be completely disregarded in the event of a quick collapse of the Gaddafi regime."

The Transitional National Council, itself largely comprised of previously long-standing government members, has reserved leading positions for further regime officials in the unelected administration to be installed in the event of Gaddafi's downfall. One TNC member, Naji Barakat, has stated that there were only "30 to 40 people" in Tripoli with whom the TNC was unwilling to work.

The "democratic" credentials of the so-called rebel forces have been further exposed

through the reign of terror imposed in the towns and villages they recently captured in the Nafusa Mountains, south of Tripoli.

A Human Rights Watch report today noted that "rebel fighters and supporters have damaged property, burned some homes, looted from hospitals, homes, and shops, and beaten some individuals alleged to have supported government forces." A *New York Times* report from the village of Qawalish indicated that the anti-Gaddafi militia appeared to be imposing brutal collective punishment on tribespeople alleged to be government supporters, forcing entire communities to flee their homes before committing indiscriminate looting and arson.

The alleged threat of such actions being carried out by Gaddafi's fighters was the central pretext for the NATO intervention—but now it is the imperialists' proxy forces who are menacing civilians.

It remains to be seen what emerges from the French-led efforts to negotiate an end to the NATO campaign. The US, France and Britain are no doubt also stepping up preparations to further intensify the war, including the potential deployment of combat forces on the ground, in the event that the discussions prove fruitless.

François Fillon's National Assembly address yesterday contained several thinly-veiled threats. According to a Reuters report, the prime minister declared that Gaddafi's back was "against the wall," while insisting that the objective was not to "eliminate" him. Fillon continued: "We have not reached the breaking point yet. But it's now that we need to be firmer than ever. And it's now that the international community must show itself to be unbending." The purpose of the National Assembly vote and discussion, he declared, was to demonstrate to Gaddafi the "total determination" of France and NATO.

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