

US and allies step up military and intelligence operations in Libya

By [Ann Talbot](#)

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The report that eight members of the UK's Special Air Service (SAS) were briefly detained in Benghazi provides confirmation that the US and its European allies are stepping up their efforts to establish firm links with elements of the opposition to the regime of President Muammar Gaddafi and secure control of Libya's oil resources.

Last week three Dutch marines were detained by forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime. They were said to be involved in rescuing Dutch civilians. British special forces were deployed to airlift civilians from remote desert oil camps. But it has never been made clear whether or not they were all withdrawn after that operation.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague refused to either confirm or deny the presence of the SAS in Libya. This is in line with London's policy of never commenting officially on the deployment of its special forces.

Questioned on BBC television's Andrew Marr Show on Sunday morning, Defence Secretary Liam Fox would say only that Britain had a "small diplomatic mission" on the ground. According to the Sunday Times, which broke the story, the SAS were escorting a "junior diplomat" to meet with leading members of the opposition. The objective was to prepare the way for a visit by more senior figures.

The SAS personnel were said to be dressed in plain clothes, carrying arms and ammunition and passports from at least four different countries. According to Sky News, the eight who were detained were part of a team of 22 soldiers who were landed by helicopter south of Benghazi.

Their detention follows the announcement that Britain intended to establish a diplomatic presence to build links with the opposition. A UK diplomat explained the plan to the Financial Times last week, saying, "Having a presence on the ground allows us to get a better understanding about what's happening. It's about getting first-hand information and analysis."

An unnamed defence analyst interviewed by the newspaper stressed that such a mission was the essential precursor to more extensive military intervention and involvement with the opposition. "Everyone is focused right now on whether there will be some heavy western military intervention such as no-fly zones or arming the rebels," the Financial Times wrote. "But before you get to that point there are lots of things governments can do to help tip the strategic advantage in favour of the rebels."

“You could help them market their oil assets, help shore up their television and broadcast capabilities, and help give them raw intelligence. This is the kind of thing a diplomatic mission might start covertly doing.”

Clearly, the “junior diplomat” was tasked with sounding out elements of the opposition National Council, which met in Benghazi on Saturday for the first time. A Whitehall insider told the Financial Times: “They are not exactly a homogenous community of people.”

William Hague is said to have spoken to General Abdul Fattah Younis al Obaidi, the former Libyan interior minister and head of Gaddafi’s special forces, who recently went over to the opposition. He and former Justice Minister Mustafa Abdel-Jalil are both looking to the US and Europe for assistance. Jalil has called for a no-fly zone to be established.

Obaidi in particular is seen as the potential head of a successor regime. He has worked closely in the past with the SAS, which trained Libyan special forces. British officials have identified him as someone with whom they could do business, according to the Daily Telegraph.

Britain’s operations in Libya are very much subordinate to the overall authority of the US. As in Afghanistan and before that in Iraq, Britain is eager to prove itself a reliable and useful ally.

In many respects, the UK’s connections with the Gaddafi regime are more extensive than those of Washington. The revelation that the London School of Economics (LSE) had accepted a multimillion-pound donation from Libya, which has proven embarrassing for the LSE, underlines the close relations that were forged between Britain and Libya by Tony Blair.

Those links are now being put to use, with William Hague phoning current members of the regime, such as the foreign minister Mussa Qusa, as well as those who have left it to join the opposition. As Gaddafi’s minister of intelligence, Mussa Qusa played a key role in negotiating the deal under which Gaddafi restored relations with the West in 2003.

British efforts are part of multifaceted operation to construct a new Libyan regime that can suppress popular opposition and ensure that the major oil companies, banks and corporations have access to Libya’s resources. Washington is seeking to exploit the mass opposition to Gaddafi to install a new client regime that will enable it to position its political and military assets to prop up reactionary regimes across North Africa and the Middle East—including Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Oman—that are being rocked by popular uprisings.

Britain is working closely with continental Europe on a common response to the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg is to attend an EU summit on the question on March 11. He has said that Europe must “radically rethink its approach to the region.”

Clegg stressed Europe’s role in shaping the future of the region. He said: “What happens in North Africa impacts on every community in Europe—this is happening in our backyard. The EU, individual member states, businesses and civil society—all of us need to step up to the plate. 2011 is certain to be a defining moment for North Africa—but it is to be a defining moment for Europe too.”

The EU plans to send an official diplomatic delegation in the next few days. Baroness Catherine Ashton, high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, said: "I have decided to dispatch this high-level mission to provide me with first-hand, real-time information to feed into the discussions leading up to the March 11 special EU leaders' summit on Libya."

Ashton thanked the Italian government for its help in preparing the way for the mission. Italy has perhaps the closest economic and political ties with Libya of all the European countries. It gets a quarter of its crude oil and 10 percent of its natural gas from Libya. Italy is Libya's largest trading partner and is the major EU exporter of arms to Libya. Its national oil company Eni has extensive investments in Libya, and Italian contractors are building a new coastal highway, railways and fibre optics networks.

The Libyan Investment Authority and other investors have stakes in some of Italy's biggest companies. Last week, Italy suspended its 2008 Friendship Treaty with Libya. This means that Italy can now allow its military bases to be used for acts of aggression against the Gaddafi regime.

France has moved rapidly to recognise the opposition National Council. Government spokesman Bernard Valero said, "France hails the creation of the Libyan National Council and pledges support for the principles that motivate it and the goals it has set itself."

New French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé condemned what he called Gaddafi's "criminal folly." The previous foreign minister, Michelle Alliot-Marie, had to resign because of her close links to Tunisian dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. France's interests in North Africa, where it is the former colonial power in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, make it imperative that it should not make the same mistake in Libya and continue its association with Gaddafi.

According to Time magazine, President Barack Obama is now refining the US response to the Libyan uprising and ensuring that the US has the full capacity to act very rapidly if necessary. Part of his strategy is to position military assets under the guise of mounting a humanitarian effort to transport refugees and provide aid to civilians. At the same time, Obama has formed a supreme intelligence committee consisting of Pentagon, National Security Council and CIA experts, which will attempt to bring together reports from US sources based among the opposition and Gaddafi's forces.

The precise scale and form of the US intervention in Libya is necessarily dependent on the developing situation in the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. Libya's oil resources are important, but Saudi Arabia's are even more vital. The continuing protest movement in Bahrain threatens to destabilise neighbouring Saudi Arabia, which recently mobilised its military to suppress protests against the royal regime.

In Egypt, an interim government has been established under military control that contains many figures from the Mubarak era. But the popular movement is continuing, with protesters occupying the headquarters of the hated security police.

Speaking last week on the situation in Libya, Obama stressed the importance of not giving the impression that the US was intervening directly in the internal affairs of the country. He pointed out that his administration had tried to avoid provoking anti-American sentiment in Egypt by openly dictating what should be done.

He said, "One of the extraordinary successes of Egypt was the full ownership that the Egyptian people felt for that transformation. That has served the Egyptian people well; it serves US interests well. We did not see anti-American sentiment arising out of that movement in Egypt precisely because they felt that we hadn't tried to engineer or impose a particular outcome, but rather they owned it. The same is happening in Tunisia."

However, the US is already intervening openly as well as covertly. Obama has demanded that Gaddafi leave and insisted that military measures such as a no-fly zone are under consideration.

As Obama's comments on Egypt suggest, the main obstacle to a bloody imperialist intervention in Libya is the risk of mass political opposition in the working class—in Libya, in other countries in the region, and in the working class in Europe and America.

Speaking on ABC television, Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, who has been critical of Obama's policy in relation to Libya, concurred in the importance of Egypt. Egypt, he told Christiane Amanpour, is "the heart and soul of the Arab world." He indicated he did not yet think it was time for a ground intervention in Libya.

John Kerry, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said on the "Face the Nation" program that the US and its allies should prepare to impose a no-fly zone. When the moderator reminded him that Defense Secretary Robert Gates last week cautioned that such a move was an act of war, beginning with the bombing of Libyan air defense systems, Kerry said he did not consider a no-fly zone to constitute military intervention.

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Articles by: [Ann Talbot](#)

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