

Britain and France lead the colonial charge into Libya

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The visit by British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy to Libya on Thursday recalls all the sordid and bloody traditions of imperialism: rank hypocrisy, economic plunder and the ruthless use of force to attain its ends.

Cameron and Sarkozy were feted by the leaders of NATO's local client—the National Transitional Council (TNC)—under heavy security in Tripoli and then whisked off to the TNC stronghold in Benghazi. Cameron hailed “free Libya” to the cheers of the assembled crowds. “France, Great Britain, Europe, will always stand by the side of the Libyan people,” Sarkozy declared.

The phony pretext for NATO's neo-colonial adventure—to protect Libyan lives from the regime of Muammar Gaddafi—has been all but dispensed with. NATO warplanes continue to pound targets around the remaining pro-Gaddafi towns of Sirte and Bani Walid with scant regard for civilian lives as the TNC and its NATO backers push to bring the entire country under their control. The Western media, which promoted the imperialist intervention with warnings about supposedly imminent massacres by the Gaddafi regime, maintains a studied silence on the hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians being killed in the NATO bombings.

Cameron declared that Benghazi “was an inspiration to the world as you threw off a dictator and chose freedom.” Next to him on the platform stood NTC Chairman Mustafa Jalil, Gaddafi's former justice minister, and NTC “prime minister” Mahmoud Jibril, who headed Gaddafi's national economic development board. Both men bear responsibility for the crimes of the Gaddafi regime and will be no less ruthless in dealing with any political opposition to the new NATO-created order.

Cameron and Sarkozy, of course, dismissed any suggestion that their visit to Libya was bound up with mercenary interests. No promises were given or sought, the French president told reporters, adding: “What we did was for humanitarian reasons. There was no agenda.” Jalil was nevertheless quick to affirm that France and Britain “will have a future influence.” He continued: “We will honour all previous contracts, but our friends will have a premier role according to their efforts in supporting Libya.” In other words, to the victors belong the spoils of oil.

So naked is the neo-colonial rush to Libya that it is openly acknowledged in the establishment press. Commenting on this week's visit, the *Guardian's* Simon Tisdall

remarked: “In truth, like self-styled conquering heroes through history, the British and French leaders arrived in hot pursuit of victors’ laurels that may, in time, produce a handy financial payback. This was, first and foremost, the Dave and Sarko spoils of war tour.”

The visit by Cameron and Sarkozy marks the beginning of a fierce competition for political influence, strategic position and profits in Libya. Yesterday Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Tripoli to declare that “the era of repressive regimes has ended.” Prior to the eruption of civil war in February, Turkey had around \$15 billion in investments in Libya, which Erdogan was keen to secure.

Earlier in the week, the CEO of Italy’s energy giant ENI, Paolo Scaroni was in Tripoli to discuss the resumption of Libyan gas exports. ENI was Libya’s largest energy producer prior to the war and is obviously keen to defend its dominant position. Libya has the largest proven energy reserves in Africa—46.4 billion barrels of oil and 55 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Libyan officials reported to the “Friends of Libya” gathering in Paris on September 2 that five major foreign energy corporations were back in the country.

All the hypocritical claims that the war for “regime change” in Libya was all about saving human lives notwithstanding, the aims of British and French imperialism in Libya, North Africa and the Middle East are no more humanitarian today that they have been for the past 200 years.

It is enough to consider briefly the history of Libya and its immediate neighbours. Seventy years of British colonial domination in Egypt began in 1882 with a naval bombardment of Alexandria and an expeditionary force to ruthlessly put down nationalist opposition. Britain invaded neighbouring Sudan under the humanitarian banner of suppressing the slave trade through the country.

France has a long history of brutal colonial rule in Algeria, Chad, Niger and Tunisia. In the 1940s and 1950s, it fought a long and bloody war to retain control of Algeria during which the French forces became notorious for torture, reprisals and wholesale slaughter. The post-colonial government estimated that as many as 1.5 million Algerians were killed in the struggle against French rule.

Libya itself was subjugated by Italy, which justified its invasion as a “civilising” mission. From the advent of Italian rule to the rout of the Italian army in World War II, half of the Libyan population was murdered, starved to death or driven into exile. Resistance to Italian rule was met with systematic aerial bombing and in 1930 the roundup of 100,000 people, mostly nomads, into concentration camps where at least half died.

While all of these countries became nominally independent following World War II, the former colonial powers maintained their economic and strategic interests indirectly through the various nationalist regimes that emerged. It is precisely the abject failure of bourgeois nationalism to end imperialist domination or address the pressing social needs and democratic aspirations of the masses that has opened the door for the new colonial interventions. Confronted with the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the US, European and emerging powers such as China and Russia are all engaged in a frantic new race against their rivals for domination in Africa, the Middle East and internationally.

During his trip to Libya, Sarkozy even signalled France’s next “humanitarian mission”, declaring that he would dedicate his visit “to those who hope that Syria can one day also be

a free country.” France was allotted control of Syria and Lebanon after World War I as part of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement with Britain that carved up the former Ottoman empire between the two imperialist powers. Not to be outdone, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan staked a claim the following day, declaring that “those who oppress the people of Syria” should realise their time was past.

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