

London Conference Plots Imperialist Carve-Up of Libya

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The conference on Libya held Tuesday at London's Lancaster House was a repulsive exercise in hypocrisy and cynicism. In the name of liberating the Libyan people, the United States and Britain brought together foreign ministers from 40 countries and dignitaries from international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO and the Arab League to sanction an escalation of the air war against the former colony and set the stage for the installation of a stooge regime.

As American, British and French missiles and bombs continued to rain down on Libyan government troops and civilian populations in cities such as Tripoli and Sirte, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Prime Minister David Cameron declared that the military assault would continue indefinitely. Clinton spoke of further economic and political sanctions against the regime of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi and indicated that Washington was moving toward arming the so-called "rebel" forces.

The conference followed President Barack Obama's televised speech Monday night, in which he not only justified the aggression in Libya, but argued that the president had a right to launch military attacks and wars anywhere in the world to defend American "values" and "interests" and maintain "the flow of commerce." This is an open-ended brief for imperialist war that even goes beyond the scope of the Bush administration's doctrine of preventive war.

It increases the short-term potential for US intervention in a number of countries in the Middle East, including Syria and Iran, and, longer-term, for war against more formidable rivals such as China.

Interviewed on the "NBC Nightly News" program Monday evening, Obama reiterated Clinton's statements at the London conference opening the door to deeper US involvement in the war, including the arming of the opposition forces led by the Benghazi-based Interim Transitional National Council.

This expansion of US militarism is backed with particular enthusiasm by the liberal and pseudo-left advocates of "humanitarian" imperialism, who cut their teeth by lining up behind American bombs and bullets in the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Expressing the contemptuous attitude of these forces for fundamental democratic principals, the New York Times published an editorial Tuesday praising Obama's speech on Libya, while chiding him for violating basic democratic and constitutional norms.

After declaring that “the rebels will likely need air support for quite some time,” the newspaper wrote: “The president made the right choice to act, but this is a war of choice, not necessity. Presidents should not commit the country to battle without consulting Congress and explaining their reasons to the American people.”

Having registered its disapproval for the record, the Times immediately brushed aside the illegality of the war, noting, “Fortunately, initial coalition military operations have gone well.”

Opening the London conference, British Prime Minister David Cameron declared, “We are all here in one united purpose, that is to help the Libyan people in their hour of need.” He denounced Gaddafi for continuing to resist militarily against the US-NATO-backed rebel forces, saying the Libyan leader was thereby in “flagrant breach of the UN Security Council resolution” that sanctioned the military intervention. The air war would continue, he said, until the regime was in full compliance with the resolution—something that could be realized only by the fall of Gaddafi from power.

As the Guardian noted, Cameron and Clinton were careful in their remarks at the conference to refrain from directly repeating their demand that Gaddafi step down, because among the governments represented at the conference there are differences over openly making regime-change an aim of the war.

“Cameron did not repeat his demand for Gaddafi to stand down immediately and to face justice at the International Criminal Court,” the Guardian noted. “The conference is attended by Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, who is hoping to broker a ceasefire between Gaddafi and the rebel forces. Franco Frattini, the foreign minister of Libya’s former imperial ruler, Italy, who has raised the prospect of spiriting Gaddafi to exile, is also attending.”

Behind the façade of unity there are bitter conflicts within the war camp. The US no doubt encouraged Britain to hold the conference in order to rein in France, which led the initial drive for war in Libya, and to use the British as a cat’s paw to assert American hegemony in a post-Gaddafi Libya.

Many divisions were evident. The African Union, whose efforts to broker a ceasefire and negotiations between Gaddafi and the rebels were blocked by the launching of military action, boycotted the conference. Likewise Russia, which the previous day had denounced the war coalition for exceeding the “humanitarian” terms of the UN resolution.

Egypt, along with some other Arab countries, also refused to attend. The military rulers of Egypt likely felt it unwise to risk the wrath of a restive population by openly joining in the colonial-style carve-up of neighboring Libya.

There are also differences over relations with the Interim Transitional National Council. To date, only France and Qatar have formally recognized the self-appointed anti-Gaddafi leadership. One of the aims of Washington and London in holding the conference was to legitimize the “democratic” opposition leadership, but differences within the war coalition prevented them from allowing the Transitional National Council delegates in attendance to formally participate in the deliberations.

As a result, a conference advertised as enabling the Libyan people to determine their own

future had no Libyan participants. Cameron nevertheless went out of his way to promote the Transitional National Council, meeting with its chairman, Mahmoud Jabil, at 10 Downing Street, naming it as the axis of a new government in his initial remarks, and opening up the Foreign Office's main briefing room for a press conference by Jabil's fellow rebel delegates.

Clinton also ostentatiously held a meeting with Jabil, allowing the two of them to be photographed together in order to underscore American support for the council. US officials announced that Washington was sending a special envoy to deepen its relations with the opposition leadership.

The right-wing, pro-imperialist character of the council is embodied in the delegates who represented it in London. Jabil taught for many years in the US after obtaining a PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. From 2007, he headed Gaddafi's National Economic Development Board, which spearheaded the introduction of capitalist market relations and the opening of Libya to foreign investment.

The two senior opposition figures who gave the press conference were Guma El-Gamaty, the council's coordinator in Britain, and Mahmoud Shammam, the council's head of media, who is based in Washington.

Shammam is managing editor of Foreign Policy magazine and has previously served as editor of Arab Newsweek. He is also a member of the advisory board on the Middle East at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. At the press conference, he appealed for the US and its allies to begin arming the opposition forces.

El-Gamaty is a Libyan writer and political commentator. He has been living in the UK for more than 30 years and was active with the Libyan opposition movement abroad in the 1980s. For the past few years, he has worked as a researcher at the University of Westminster.

All of these figures have close ties with American and European corporate, political and, it can be safely presumed, intelligence organizations.

Clinton's press conference following the meeting exposed the fraud of America's supposed struggle against Al Qaeda and the "war on terror" as a whole. The US Secretary of State made clear that Washington had not ruled out arming the so-called "rebels" and asserted that such action would be permitted under UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the military intervention in Libya.

A Reuters reporter questioned Clinton on possible US arms for the opposition, citing the remarks that day of US Adm. James Stavridis, who told a Senate committee that there were "flickers" of US intelligence on links between the Interim Transitional National Council and Al Qaeda and Hezbollah.

"How great a concern is that?" the reporter asked. "And is that part of the US debate over any potential arms transfers to the transitional council?"

Clinton brushed aside the danger of funneling US arms to Al Qaeda via the Libyan opposition, saying, "We do not have any specific information about specific individuals from any organization who are part of this, but, of course, we're still getting to know those who are leading the Transitional National Council."

The next questioner, from the Times of London, called it “quite striking” that “none of the names” of the rebel leaders were public, “apart from three or four of the 30-odd of them.” He continued: “Do you think they should be more transparent in terms of declaring who they are, where they’re from, what kind of groupings they come from, and how they’re using the money?”

Clinton merely replied that “we’re picking up information,” adding that “this is a work in progress.”

Just two days before, Clinton had appeared with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates on several Sunday interview programs, during which they insisted that the US had to continue to support Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, despite his deadly attacks on demonstrators, because of the threat represented by the presence of Al Qaeda in Yemen.

The dismissal by the Obama administration—as well as the media—of possible links between the Libyan opposition and Al Qaeda makes fairly clear that the relationship between the United States and Al Qaeda is complex and intimate. After all, the top figures in the terrorist network, including Osama bin Laden, got their start as assets of the CIA in the US-backed mujahedin guerilla war of the 1980s against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

This double standard in relation to the supposed central enemy in the “war on terror” is but one of many contradictions that expose the imperialist and neo-colonial character of the US-led war in Libya.

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