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Pentagon prepares another war in Libya

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A little less than five years after launching a war against Libya on the “humanitarian” pretext of preventing a supposedly imminent massacre, the United States and its European allies are preparing a new military assault against the oil-rich North African country under the bloodstained banner of the “war on terrorism.”

Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook confirmed Wednesday that Washington is “looking at military options” in relation to Libya and acknowledged that US special operations troops are operating on the ground there in a bid to “get a sense of who the players are, who might be worthy of US support and support from some of our partners as we go forward.”

The Pentagon spokesman’s remarks echoed earlier comments by the US military’s senior commander. “It’s fair to say that we’re looking to take decisive military action against ISIL [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] in conjunction with the political process” in Libya, Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last Friday. “The president has made clear that we have the authority to use military force.”

As for the presence of special operations troops, that story too was no secret, though largely blacked out by the corporate media. A photograph posted on the Facebook page of the Libyan air force last month showed about 20 American commandos dressed in civilian clothes and carrying

automatic weapons. According to the caption that accompanied the photograph, the Libyan forces in charge of the air base “refused their intervention, disarmed them and forced them off Libyan lands.”

Pentagon officials confirmed the incident, while telling NBC News that similar US units have been “in and out of Libya” for “some time now.”

The “human rights” pretext foisted on the public in 2011 and the “terror” pretext being employed today are equally fraudulent. They are both designed to conceal the predatory objectives of military interventions carried out with the aim of imposing US semi-colonial hegemony over countries and regions sitting on top of vast energy resources—in Libya’s case the largest oil reserves on the entire African continent.

It is, however, a measure of the uninterrupted growth of American militarism and the corresponding degradation of American democracy that, while in 2011 Obama delivered a televised speech to the nation providing his phony justifications for the war and then secured a UN Security Council resolution as a legal fig leaf for naked aggression, in 2016 a Marine Corps general casually remarks that he has the authority to launch a new war whenever he sees fit.

In 2011, the story was put out that Libya’s longtime ruler, Muammar Gaddafi, was on the brink of carrying out a wholesale massacre of “peaceful political protesters” in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. Only Western intervention could save lives, Obama and his NATO allies insisted, and there was no time to waste.

These assertions were echoed and amplified by an entire coterie of pseudo-lefts. Some of them, like the French New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) embellished upon the arguments of the imperialist powers, insisting that the defense of the “Libyan revolution” was the paramount issue. In the words of the NPA’s prominent spokesman, academic Gilbert Achcar, “You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians.”

Similarly, the University of Michigan professor Juan Cole, whose “left” credentials stemmed from his rather qualified opposition to the Iraq war, declared, “To make ‘anti-imperialism’ trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions.” For emphasis, he added, “If NATO needs me, I’m there.”

With such support, US imperialism and its European allies, invoking the neocolonialist doctrine of “R2P” (responsibility to protect), turned the UN’s resolution authorizing a no-fly zone to prevent the bombardment of Benghazi into a carte blanche for a war for regime change that saw massive US-NATO bombardments, the deaths of some 30,000 Libyans and the lynch mob torture and murder of Gaddafi in October 2011.

After it was all over, NGOs and human rights groups like the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International acknowledged that there were no factual grounds for claiming that Benghazi had been threatened with a “massacre.”

In the five years that have followed, however, the Libyan people have been plunged into a real and hellish humanitarian catastrophe. As many as two million Libyans, roughly a third of the prewar population, have been forced into exile in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt. Those who remain face catastrophic conditions, with hundreds of thousands internally displaced by the fighting that has raged between rival militias ever since the toppling of Gaddafi.

Human Rights Watch, which supported the US-NATO war of 2011, reported this month that the militias that rule the country have “indiscriminately shelled civilian areas, arbitrarily seized people, tortured and looted, burned, and otherwise destroyed civilian property in attacks that in some cases amounted to war crimes.” It adds that these forces “attack, abduct and disappear, and forcefully displace people from their homes,” while “[t]he domestic criminal justice system collapsed in most parts of the country, exacerbating the human rights crisis.” Thousands of Libyans, as well as foreigners, are imprisoned without charges or trials, many since 2011, in a system of militia-run jails where torture is endemic.

No one, of course, is invoking “R2P” today, under conditions that are indescribably worse than what existed in March of 2011. On the contrary, the pretext for the war now being prepared is combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has established a stronghold in the coastal city of Sirte, the former hometown of Gaddafi that was largely demolished in a protracted siege in 2011.

Those within the political establishment and the media who bother connecting the growth of ISIS in Libya to the US-NATO intervention of 2011 habitually present the matter as a sin of omission: Washington and its allies failed to follow up the bombing campaign with a “nation-building” occupation.

This is, of course, a deliberate cover-up for very real crimes that were committed. ISIS is not some accidental beneficiary of chaos in Libya. Its own growth and development were intimately bound up with the US-NATO war, in which similar Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias were lavishly armed and funded to serve as ground troops.

After the overthrow and murder of Gaddafi, these same elements, along with vast quantities of arms looted from Libyan government stockpiles, were funneled into Syria as part of a CIA-orchestrated effort to stoke a war for regime change in that country. This operation greatly strengthened ISIS and similar outfits, while Libyans who had been sent to fight in Syria returned home, resulting in the Islamist group’s spread along Libya’s northern coastline.

Thus, the source of the supposed ISIS terrorism threat in Libya—which is the pretext for yet another war—is the endless and escalating succession of military interventions by US imperialism itself, which have plunged the entire region into bloodshed and chaos, while threatening to ignite a global conflagration.