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US sends assault ship with 1,000 Marines to Libyan coast

By Barry Grey
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The United States has dispatched an amphibious assault ship with some 1,000 Marines and a number of helicopters to coastal waters off Libya, raising the possibility of a direct US military intervention in a country devastated by the Washington-led war that overthrew Col. Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

On Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman Col. Steve Warren told the press that the USS Bataan had been moved to the region “to address unrest in the region, specifically North Africa.” An unnamed Pentagon official said the ship would be off the Libyan coast “within a matter of days.”

The deployment is ostensibly a “precautionary measure” in the event that the political anarchy and fighting between rival militias that is gripping the country force the US to evacuate its embassy in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. However, Washington is deeply involved in the civil strife wracking Libya and is almost certainly backing a rebel general and long-time Central Intelligence Agency asset who is seeking to carry out a coup against the Islamist-dominated government.

The deployment of the USS Bataan follows the reinforcement of a Marine contingent at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. On May 19, US officials announced that some 60 additional Marines and another four Osprey aircraft were being sent to Sicily from their base in Spain in order to be closer to Libya. That brings the total number of Marines at the Sicilian base to about 250. The officials added that the US forces in Sicily had been placed on heightened alert.

The May 19 announcement came one day after heavily armed gunmen stormed Libya's parliament and gunfire erupted across the capital as rival militias clashed. The attack on the parliament is linked to the campaign by former general Khalif Hiftar to defeat Islamist jihadist militias in Benghazi and other eastern regions and bring down the nominally elected government in Tripoli.

Hiftar, who broke with Gaddafi in the 1980s and settled in the US, living for years in Langley, Virginia, where the CIA is headquartered, joined the US-backed "rebels" in the 2011 war. He has now emerged as a would-be strongman, reportedly receiving military and financial backing from regional allies of the US such as Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

He is demanding the resignation of the prime minister, businessman Ahmed Miitig, and the replacement of the General National Congress (GNC) with an emergency government supervised by Libya's supreme court. Miitig was elected prime minister in a chaotic vote by the GNC this month following the resignation in April of Abdullah al-Thani, who stepped down after claiming he and his family had been attacked.

Miitig said his home in Tripoli came under rocket and small arms attack at 3 a.m. Tuesday. This week also saw the assassination of one of Libya's most prominent newspaper editors in Benghazi.

The announcement of the deployment of the USS Bataan to Libyan waters followed the reported attack on Miitig. Also on Tuesday, the US State Department issued a travel advisory recommending that Americans in Libya "depart immediately." The statement included the following warning: "Because of the presumption that foreigners, especially US citizens, in Libya may be associated with the US government or US NGOs, travelers should be aware that they may be targeted for kidnapping, violent attacks or death."

Hiftar has launched attacks on Islamist militias in Benghazi and elsewhere using high-power weaponry. His targets include Ansar al-Sharia, the jihadist militia that was allied with the US and NATO in the war against Gaddafi but turned against Washington and played a major role in the September 11, 2012 attack on the US consulate and a CIA facility in Benghazi, in which US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

Hiftar's forces have been joined by the Libyan air force, the country's special forces, a number of major militias (including some linked to Al Qaeda) and, according to the private intelligence

web site Stratfor, “Ibrahim Jadhnan’s federalist militias that maintain control over key export terminals in the east.”

On Wednesday, Hiftar’s forces carried out air strikes against hostile militias in Benghazi, including Ansar al-Sharia.

The US State Department claims to have no contact with Hiftar and maintains that the US “does not condone” his actions. However, the US ambassador to Libya, Deborah Jones, has all but endorsed the longtime CIA asset and his coup attempt. She recently said, “It’s very difficult to step up and condemn” Hiftar, given that this forces are “going after very specific groups ... on our list of terrorists.”

The claim that Washington’s machinations in Libya are motivated by a struggle against terrorism is a fraud. The US financed and armed Al Qaeda-linked terrorists in Libya in its war for regime-change against Gaddafi. That war was motivated by Washington’s desire to put in place a puppet regime that would enable it to control Libya’s vast oil reserves and use the strategically located country to project US power into Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Ambassador Stevens headed up a Benghazi-based operation to funnel jihadist militia forces into Syria to conduct the US-backed civil war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. He became the victim in a classic case of “blowback” at the hands of Islamist leaders who were dissatisfied with their share of the political and economic spoils of the Libyan war.

In an analysis published Friday, Stratfor bluntly placed control of Libyan oil at the center of the current conflict in the country and US policy toward it. The statement noted that the US allies in the region believed to be backing Hiftar “all share a desire to contain jihadist activity in eastern Libya.” It continued: “The United States and its European allies also have interests in stabilizing eastern Libyan oil production.”

It went on to state categorically, “US government contacts have been in direct communication with Hiftar and Tripoli at the same time as rumors of Egyptian military support [for Hiftar] have been escalating.”