

NATO's Puppet Regime in Libya Falls Apart

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The sacking of the entire Benghazi-based Libyan opposition cabinet this week has exposed the anti-democratic, faction-riven character of the regime that the US and its European allies are seeking to impose on Libya. The self-proclaimed Transitional National Council (TNC)—facing a military stalemate in efforts to oust Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi due to its lack of popular support—is being consumed by violent internal conflicts.

TNC President Abdul Mustafa Jalil ordered the dismissal of the TNC's executive committee on Monday, after the unexplained murder of the organisation's military chief, General Abdel Fatah Younis, on July 28. Only Mahmoud Jibril, the TNC's so-called prime minister, was kept on to form the next cabinet. In a further sign of disarray, Jalil insisted that members of various autonomous militias operating broadly under the TNC's banner had to integrate into its armed forces as individuals rather than units.

Jalil was acting under demands for justice from Younis's family members and the powerful Obeidi tribe, and under pressure from the February 17 Coalition, a secular grouping of Libyan judges and lawyers, critical of the growing influence of Islamists within the TNC. As it announced the sackings, a TNC spokesman declared that the cabinet was responsible for "improper administrative procedures" that led to Younis's death.

No official explanation has been given for the arrest and killing of Younis, which has been the subject of bitter recriminations. He was Gaddafi's interior minister before defecting to the Benghazi opposition, along with the Special Forces troops under his command.

Those close to Younis have accused an Islamist militia of killing him, to avenge the general's savage repression of an Islamist uprising in the mid-1990s and to block his efforts to bring TNC military units under his unified command. Various Islamist organisations—including those derived from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Al Qaeda-aligned Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)—are prominent in the TNC's loosely-organised military umbrella group, known as the Union of Revolutionary Forces.

An article in Canada's Globe and Mail last week highlighted the increasing assertiveness of Islamist forces led by Mohammed Busidra, who dubs himself "a moderate". His network includes the Muslim Brotherhood, the February 17 Martyrs' Brigade led by cleric Ismail Al-Sallabi, and a number of other Islamist imams. In his Globe and Mail interview, Busidra explained that he had drawn up an Islamist constitution for post-Gaddafi Libya and wanted Sheikh Al-Sallabi, Ismail's brother who is currently based in Doha, to take on the presidency.

Ismail Al-Sallabi has blamed Gaddafi infiltrators, rather than an Islamist militia, for the killing of Younis. As factional tensions inside the TNC have sharpened, his units have been rounding

up dozens of “Gaddafi loyalists”, which undoubtedly include political opponents. To date, none of the militia has abided by the TNC’s order to integrate into a unified military force.

A third factor in the Younis killing is the shady military figure Khalifa Hifter, a former Libyan army colonel with a long association with the CIA. He is known to have clashed with Younis for control of the TNC’s military wing. Whether or not he is directly implicated, Hifter’s presence in the TNC confirms the involvement of various Western intelligence agencies in the sordid machinations in Benghazi.

A fortnight after Younis’s death, TNC president Jalil, himself a former Gaddafi justice minister, has offered no account of what happened. Moreover, he has been forced to dismiss his entire “cabinet” to keep control of his fractious coalition of Islamists, ex-Gaddafi officials, CIA assets and assorted adventurers.

What emerges is a devastating indictment of the Obama administration and its European allies along with all the pseudo left organisations and liberals such as American professor Juan Cole, who have acted as cheerleaders for the NATO bombing campaign in Libya. A TNC regime imposed on Libya by NATO would be at least as corrupt and repressive as the regime headed by Gaddafi.

Even as the TNC’s anti-democratic and mercenary character has become more apparent, however, the US and European powers have extended diplomatic recognition to it. Amid the factional infighting that followed Younis’s murder, the US, Britain and other countries have handed over Libyan embassies to Gaddafi’s opponents. At the same time, however, the same powers are keeping a tight rein on Libya’s overseas financial assets—to fund and maintain control over their fractious puppets in Benghazi.

The NATO powers’ decision to back a group like the TNC shows that their intervention in Libya never aimed to protect civilians or establish democracy, but to advance their strategic and economic ambitions. These include the domination of Libya’s substantial oil reserves and the establishment of a beachhead in North Africa, from which to control and suppress the emerging revolutionary movements in the region, above all in neighbouring Egypt.

For months, NATO ministers have been proclaiming the impending fall of Gaddafi. After the TNC’s military efforts ground to a halt, the focus shifted to speculation about an uprising in Tripoli or a coup against Gaddafi by elements of his regime. While Gaddafi has maintained his grip on power, the TNC in Benghazi is now fracturing. Moreover, the assassination of Younis will hardly inspire confidence among other Gaddafi loyalists to defect to the TNC.

Responding to the sacking of the TNC executive committee, the US State Department issued a statement declaring that it provided an opportunity for “reflection” and “renewal.” These bland remarks reflect Washington’s continued support for TNC president Jibril and his clique. At the same time, the US and the Europeans are no doubt exploring all options, including, as the Globe and Mail indicated, among the Islamist faction around Bushidra.

The intrigues and infighting in Benghazi serve to underline the neo-colonial character of the NATO military intervention in Libya. Only the building of a socialist movement based on the working class in Libya and the region—in opposition both to Gaddafi and his bourgeois opponents—can offer a progressive way out of the current political impasse.

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