

US, NATO defend air strike that murdered Gaddafi family members

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US and NATO officials have brushed aside charges by the Libyan government that the air strike Saturday night that killed the youngest son and three grandchildren of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was a targeted assassination intended to murder Gaddafi.

Gaddafi and his wife were present when the strike virtually demolished the building, but reportedly survived the attack. Saif al-Arab Gaddafi, his youngest son and one not known to be active in the regime, was killed, as were three of Gaddafi's grandchildren, reportedly aged 12 months to four years old.

The strike came several hours after Gaddafi gave a speech calling for a ceasefire in the civil war with the US-backed "rebels" and for negotiations with Washington and NATO. As they have done repeatedly before, the US and its allies rejected Gaddafi's appeal out of hand.

The Libyan government accused the NATO powers of "a direct operation to assassinate the leader of this country" in violation of international law. Libyan government spokesman Moussa Ibrahim said: "We ask the world to look into this carefully, because what we have now is the law of the jungle. How is this helping in the protection of civilians?"

NATO has acknowledged that it fired four "precision-guided" missiles into the family residence of the 29-year-old son of the Libyan ruler, in a residential part of Tripoli, but insists that the building was a "command and control" center and a legitimate target under the terms of the March 17 United Nations resolution that authorized the imposition of a "no-fly zone" and "all necessary measures" to protect civilians from government attack.

As supposed proof of the military nature of the building, NATO officials claimed that it had a bunker underneath. This, however, would hardly be surprising

since Gaddafi and his family were repeatedly targeted for assassination between the colonel's coming to power in 1969 and his rapprochement with Washington and the European powers during the 2000s.

Saif al-Arab Gaddafi, then four years old, survived one such attempt—the 1986 US bombing of the presidential compound in Tripoli—in which Gaddafi's adopted daughter was among those killed.

On the second day of the US-British-French-NATO air war launched March 19, the same compound was bombed. The presidential compound was bombed again on April 25, and earlier last Saturday the allies, now including Italy, hit a government complex in Tripoli that housed a commission for women and children along with parliamentary staff offices.

Saturday night's deadly strike was at least the fourth since the air war began on facilities used by Gaddafi. Last week, NATO announced that it would expand its target list to so-called command-and-control and administrative facilities—a thinly veiled threat to carry out targeted assassinations.

The reality is that the US and its European allies have turned to assassination as the focus of their efforts after six weeks of bombings have killed hundreds of Libyan troops and civilians but failed to break the Gaddafi regime, and the so-called "rebels" have proven incapable of advancing against pro-government forces.

The White House has issued no official statement on Saturday night's air strike, and NATO officials have refused to acknowledge that Gaddafi's son and grandchildren were killed. Both the Pentagon and NATO said Sunday they had no independent evidence to confirm the deaths.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has also refused to comment on the air strikes.

On Sunday morning, enraged crowds of Libyans

ransacked the British and Italian embassies and the US consulate in Tripoli, as well as United Nations offices. The UN responded by evacuating its 12 remaining international staff members.

This reaction to the murder of Gaddafi's son and grandchildren evoked the ire of those responsible for the killings. The British government ordered the Libyan ambassador to leave within 24 hours, the Italian Foreign Ministry condemned the "acts of vandalism" on its embassy as "grave and vile," and US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said the Gaddafi regime "once again breached its international responsibilities and obligations" by failing to protect diplomatic missions in Tripoli.

On Monday, several thousand people attended the funeral of Saif al-Arab Gaddafi in Tripoli, including Gaddafi's most prominent son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and his elder half-brother Mohammed. Residents crowded around the hearse, chanting, "Revenge, revenge for you, Libya."

As they marched, NATO warplanes circled overhead.

The murder of Gaddafi's family members has provoked opposition from some quarters internationally. Russia framed an accusation that the US and NATO were lying in diplomatic language, declaring that the NATO attack aroused "serious doubts about coalition members' statement that the strikes in Libya do not have the goal of physically annihilating Mr. Gaddafi and members of his family."

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Sunday accused NATO of using disproportionate force and causing civilian deaths and called for a ceasefire. It was joined by China's Foreign Ministry, which renewed its call for a ceasefire.

Both China and Russia, which had established close ties to the Gaddafi regime, had abstained in the March 17 Security Council vote on UN Resolution 1973, which authorized the imperialist attack on Libya. They were joined in abstaining by Brazil, India and Germany.

There has been no significant protest over the US-NATO targeted killing from any section of the US political or media establishment. Stephen Hadley, a former national security adviser to President George W. Bush, criticized the air strike from a tactical standpoint, arguing that it was detrimental to the goal of eliminating the Gaddafi regime and replacing it with an

outright puppet government.

Speaking on CNN's "State of the Union" program Sunday, he said, "The narrative we want to come out of this is that the Libyan people overthrew a dictator, not that we came in and toppled a despot... what we really want [Gaddafi] to do is for him to leave or to die at a Libyan hand, not an American hand."

Leading Democrats as well as Republicans expressed no similar reservations, openly embracing assassination as official state policy. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, in an interview on "Fox News Sunday," said, "Wherever Gaddafi goes, he is a legitimate military target."

Senator John McCain of Arizona, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, declared on CBS Television's "Face the Nation" program: "We should be taking out his command and control, and if he is killed or injured because of that, that's fine."

Speaking on "Fox News Sunday," Democratic Senator Kent Conrad of North Dakota said: "Gaddafi has got to go. I have said repeatedly I think you go after the pillars of his power... You cannot allow him to continue."



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