

Death squads reportedly assassinating Libyan regime figures in Benghazi

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12 May 2011

The *New York Times* yesterday reported on a wave of execution-style murders of former Libyan government internal security personnel in Benghazi. The killings, the *Times* noted, “have raised the specter of a death squad stalking former Gadhafi officials in Benghazi, the opposition stronghold.”

The bodies of two men, Nasser al-Sirmany and Hussein Ghaith, were found within days of each other, in farmland on the outskirts of Benghazi, Libya’s second largest city and the centre of the so-called rebel leadership. Sirmany was discovered with his hands and feet bound. He had been shot twice in the head, after reportedly disappearing earlier in the day, after visiting a market. Ghaith was kidnapped from his home by masked and armed men during the night, and was later found dead with a single bullet to the forehead. Both men had reportedly worked as interrogators for Muammar Gaddafi’s brutal internal security agencies.

At least four similar attacks are now under investigation by authorities in Benghazi, while it is unclear how many more killings have gone unreported. The so-called Transitional National Council (TNC) has denied that its security forces are responsible—though the *New York Times* acknowledged that “rebel authorities have spent weeks trying to round up people suspected of being Gadhafi loyalists.”

This campaign points to the TNC’s responsibility for the death squads now active in Benghazi. The international media has been notably silent on how many people have been “rounded up” in eastern Libya, and how those accused of not supporting the “rebel” leadership are being treated in detention.

Time According to prosecutors then investigating the death squad killings “are exploring the possible involvement of Islamists who were imprisoned by the Gadhafi government and are now settling old scores.”

The report did not explain what Islamist forces are suspected of responsibility. Various fundamentalist groups are affiliated with the TNC, working alongside ex-Gaddafi regime members, expatriate businessmen, and American intelligence assets. Islamist fighters, including some previously detained in Guantanamo Bay, are active in the ranks of the TNC’s so-called security forces. Contrary to the picture provided by the *New York Times*, if Islamist gunmen have formed an assassination team in Benghazi, this makes the involvement of TNC forces more, not less, likely.

The situation again exposes the bogus “humanitarian” pretext of the US-NATO bombardment of Libya. Washington and its allies in Europe raised the spectre of the Gaddafi regime unleashing mass killings in Benghazi in order to justify their military intervention into the oil-rich state. The real aim of the war is to oust Gaddafi, install a client administration in Tripoli, and use Libya as a base of operations against the revolutionary movements in neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia that threaten to undermine the imperialist powers’ economic interests and strategic position in North Africa and the Middle East.

Reports of death squad operations in Benghazi have emerged as even closer relations are being forged between the TNC and the Obama administration and European powers. TNC chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil has spent the last two days in Europe and the US,

campaigning for more money and military support.

Today he is meeting with Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague, and finance minister George Osborne. Yesterday, Jalil and Ali Tarhouni—the TNC's "finance minister" who has lived in the US since the 1970s—were in Washington for discussions with numerous Obama administration officials. These included national security adviser Tom Donilon, and officials with the Treasury and State Departments.

Jalil and Tarhouni also met with Senator John Kerry and other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Kerry afterwards indicated that he would sponsor legislation facilitating the potential transfer of billions of dollars in frozen Libyan assets to the so-called rebels. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced on May 5, at the second "Contact Group" summit in Italy, that "some portion" of the more than \$30 billion in frozen Libyan assets would be funneled to the TNC.

Kerry's legislation is aimed at providing this brazenly unlawful theft of a country's sovereign wealth with a pseudo-legal cover.

Negotiations between the TNC and the Obama administration for the release of this money underscore the venal and bought-and-paid-for character of the so-called rebel leadership. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that one proposal "championed" by the TNC "would establish an international trust fund to oversee the disbursement of funds ... under the plan, the fund would be administered by the international community, and funds disbursed would ultimately be paid back by the council."

Such a multi-billion dollar mortgage deal will no doubt include secret terms, including guaranteeing Libya's oil for the major Western oil companies.

NATO forces have stepped up their bombing campaign in recent days. On Tuesday, a series of airstrikes hit four cities, including the capital Tripoli and Gaddafi's home town of Sirte. The *Washington Post* noted that "the new assault appeared to reflect

increased cooperation between NATO and the rebel army", with "improved targeting of dug-in loyalist forces, made possible in part by the presence of US Predator drone aircraft."

NATO claimed that the heavy bombardment was aimed at "control and command" centres. Previous attacks on these so-called centres have in fact been assassination attempts against Gaddafi. One strike on April 30 killed the ruler's youngest son and three of his grandchildren. The Libyan dictator yesterday made his first televised appearance since this incident—apparently recorded in a Tripoli hotel housing international journalists, in order to deter another strike.

Chief operations officer of NATO's Libya mission, Brigadier General Claudio Gabellini, absurdly told a press conference Tuesday that "we're not really interested in what he [Gaddafi] is doing". Yesterday, however, it appears that Italian Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa let slip the real agenda—*Al Jazeera* cited him as saying that "Gaddafi is a legitimate target if he is inside a military installation."

Anti-Gaddafi forces in Misrata have claimed control of the contested city's airport, which if true would mark a significant advance. Some reports from the area described ongoing fighting, however, and government spokesmen have denied losing the airport. Fighting is also resuming outside of the important oil port city of Brega, held by Gaddafi forces since early April. In a clear sign of the growing integration of the TNC's militia with the NATO command, *Al Jazeera* reported: "Rather than attempt to take the town during their assault on Tuesday, rebel forces reportedly withdrew to allow NATO planes to strike any government vehicles that participated in a counterattack."



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