

General's killing sparks crisis in Western-backed Libyan TNC

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The assassination Thursday of former Gaddafi official and military chief of the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council (TNC), General Abdel Fatah Younis, has raised the specter of a civil war within the Western-backed Libyan "rebels".

Younis's death was announced Thursday night by the president of the TNC, Abdul Mustafa Jalil, who revealed that the general had been "summoned" by TNC security forces earlier in the day for questioning about "military matters."

The press conference was preceded by exchanges of gunfire between armed men loyal to Younis, who had attacked the Benghazi hotel where it was held demanding Younis's release. After the announcement of his death, Younis's troops confronted TNC security forces, shouting, "You killed him."

While Jalil cited prior threats against Younis from the Libyan government and warned against "rumors and activities that the Gaddafi regime wishes to initiate within our ranks," his account of the assassination was decidedly vague.

He spoke of the "procedures that happened to him, which are under investigation." While claiming that the "head of the armed group" responsible was under arrest, he said that other assailants and the bodies of Younis and two officers killed with him were still being sought.

Relatives of Younis received his body late Thursday, reporting that he had been shot, his throat slit and his body burned. Thousands turned out Friday for a funeral procession, with mourners chanting "Martyrs are God's beloved" as they carried Younis's coffin to a cemetery.

An officer close to Younis told the Associated Press Friday that the general was murdered by members of the February 17 Martyrs Brigade, a militia group commanded by a local imam that acts as a security force for the TNC.

Mohammed Agoury, an officer in the special forces unit that Younis brought with him in defecting to the Benghazi-

based council, said that he was present Wednesday morning when armed men from the brigade seized the general at his headquarters near the contested eastern oil refinery and terminal town of Brega.

Prominent among the February 17 Martyrs Brigades are former fighters of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), an Islamist armed group that was outlawed by the United Nations because of its links to Al Qaeda. The group, which attempted to assassinate Gaddafi and clashed with Libyan security forces, was repressed by the regime.

Conflicting reports indicated that Younis, who defected to the TNC last February after serving as interior minister in the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi, was arrested for interrogation either over suspicion of continuing ties between his family and the regime or charges that he had secretly aided Gaddafi's forces. These included rumors that he had supplied weapons to these forces and that he had somehow engineered recent "friendly fire" NATO air strikes on the TNC "rebels."

Younis's prestige in part stemmed from his role in the so-called Free Unitary Officers' Movement, the Nasserite-inspired group of junior military officers that seized power in the 1969 coup that toppled the US-backed monarchy of King Idris. He had been among Gaddafi's closest confidantes and was considered the number two man within the regime before his defection.

As interior minister and previously as minister for public security, Younis had directed the regime's repression and was therefore distrusted by a significant layer of those backing the Benghazi-based council, particularly the Islamist elements.

Tensions were further heightened with the arrival in March in Libya of Khalifa Hefter, a former army officer who had broken with the Gaddafi regime and become an "asset" of the US Central Intelligence Agency, living near the agency's Langley, Virginia headquarters since the

early 1990s.

Upon his return, Hefter insisted that he, not Younis, was the real commander of the NATO-backed “rebels.” After a period of bitter in-fighting, it was announced that Younis was the commander-in-chief, while Hefter was named as commander of ground forces.

In reading out the TNC’s statement on Younis’s death, Jalil surrounded himself not with council ministers but rather leaders of the murdered general’s Obeidat tribe, repeatedly appealing for its support.

“I ask the Obeidat tribe for its understanding of the situation, and all the other tribes that are here to support the Obeidat tribe and support everyone after these accidents, and to remember that ending the regime of Muammar Gaddafi is our foremost objective,” Jalil said. He added, “These events will not turn the Obeidat tribe away from the revolution.”

The Obeidat tribe, one of the region’s more powerful, is centered in the strategic port city of Tobruk in far northeastern Libya, which controls a major oil pipeline.

The appearance of truckloads of armed Obeidat tribesmen in Benghazi after Younis’s abduction and armed clashes in the streets of the city following news of his death have raised the specter of a tribal-based civil war breaking out within the Benghazi-based forces backed by Washington and NATO.

Such a conflict could unleash the North African country’s further disintegration, with rival tribal factions seeking to assert their control over oil facilities and resources.

Younis’s death also threatens to tear apart the TNC’s fractious alliance of ex-Gaddafi officials, CIA “assets” and Islamists precisely at the point in which the major powers, including recently Washington and London, have recognized the council as the legitimate government of Libya.

This recognition appears to be part of a campaign by the NATO powers to pressure the Gaddafi regime into negotiating a settlement of the conflict that would secure greater control of the country by the West and the major Western energy conglomerates. US, British and French officials have all backed away from earlier ultimatums vowing that the Western intervention could not end without Gaddafi’s removal from Libya.

After more than four months of NATO bombing, the so-called “rebels” appear no closer in their goal of toppling the Gaddafi regime. The protracted stalemate in the east of the country contributed to tensions that may have been behind the assassination of Younis. Given the former

Gaddafi minister’s conflict with the CIA-linked Hefter, there is also the possibility that he was targeted by Washington for elimination.

The killing follows fresh revelations of Western intervention in the Libyan civil war. The French daily *Le Figaro* reported Wednesday that France had airdropped “large quantities” of rocket launchers, assault rifles, machine-guns and anti-tank missiles to anti-Gaddafi forces in western Libya. The AFP news agency said that the French had even driven light tanks across the Tunisian border and provided more than 40 tons of armaments. A French military spokesman confirmed to AFP the supply of arms, while claiming that they consisted of light arms and “mainly ammunition” intended for “self-defense.”

AFP reported that the decision to conduct the weapons drops came after a meeting last April between President Nicholas Sarkozy and the now dead TNC commander Younis.

The report drew a sharp criticism from the Russian government. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the French action as “a very crude violation of UN Security Council resolution 1970,” which imposed an arms embargo, explicitly barring the shipment of weapons to any faction in Libya.

The African Union likewise attacked the French arms shipments, declaring that they threatened to unleash the “Somaliaization” of Libya.

Speaking at an African Union summit in Equatorial Guinea, AU chairman Jean Ping said that the French arms supplies threatened neighboring countries with “the risk of civil war, risk of partition of the country, the risk of ‘Somaliaization’ of the country, risk of having arms everywhere ... with terrorism.”



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