

NATO facing military stalemate in Libya

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The unexplained killing last week of the Libyan rebel military commander, General Abdel Fatah Younis, has highlighted the divided and unstable character of the NATO-backed Transitional National Council (TNC) and the military stalemate in its efforts to oust the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The assassination has provoked a series of comments by British and French ministers that effectively reverse months of US and NATO propaganda predicting the imminent fall of Gaddafi.

Speaking on Monday, British Foreign Secretary William Hague declared: “We don’t know how long it will be. We don’t know when Colonel Gaddafi will see that he has to go. We don’t know when members of his regime will come to that conclusion.” While expressing the British government’s determination to continue the war, Hague warned that “in a conflict, things do not go in an even manner.”

In a revealing comment, Hague defended the NATO bombing campaign, saying it had saved “many thousands of lives and stopped the destabilisation of Egypt and Tunisia.” Saving civilian lives is the pretext used to justify NATO’s illegal war on Libya. The reference to Egypt and Tunisia, however, confirms that, along with securing control of Libya’s oil, the US and NATO are intent on establishing a beachhead against the revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa.

Hague’s comments followed those on Sunday of British Defence Secretary Liam Fox, who conceded that the Libyan rebels were unlikely to topple Gaddafi. “The key to the Libyan resolution,” Fox said, “will be whether or not the close circle around Colonel Gaddafi realise there’s no point in investing in him. He’s a busted flush; he will sooner or later have to leave

power.”

French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet made similar remarks on Sunday, declaring that the so-called “rebel” fighters would not be able to take the Libyan capital by themselves. “Things have to move in Tripoli,” he said. “To put it clearly, the population has to rise up. The month ahead will naturally be intense. There will not be, I think, a pause for the [Muslim fasting] month of Ramadan.”

These remarks reflect concerns in Washington and European capitals about the stability of the TNC, which they have accorded diplomatic recognition. A week after the murder of General Younis, there is still no clarity as to what happened or why. Younis was apparently brought from the front lines last Thursday to face questioning on undisclosed charges in Benghazi, where he was killed along with two other officers.

Younis’s supporters have pointed the finger at the February 17 Martyrs Brigades, a militia group commanded by a local imam that includes known Islamists. Keen to avert a factional war inside the “rebel” regime, TNC spokesmen have attempted to blame Gaddafi loyalists operating undercover in Benghazi.

In a second unexplained incident, TNC forces fought a pitched battle in the early hours of Sunday with a militia group alleged to be a “fifth column” of pro-Gaddafi supporters. The fighting lasted for more than eight hours and left three TNC fighters and four militia members dead. TNC Deputy Interior Minister Mustafa al-Sagisli claimed that arms and explosives along with a hit list with Younis’s name were found at the factory where the militia was holed up.

In order to strengthen its grip on Benghazi, the TNC has been attempting to rein in various quasi-independent militias that have been operating in the city. On Saturday, just hours before the clash, TNC leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil warned various armed groups to join the TNC or be “crushed.”

TNC leaders could well have seized on the battle to invent a “fifth column” to deflect anger among members of Younis’s tribe—one of the largest groups backing the TNC. The *New York Times* reported that Younis’s relations were warning that the general’s killers had to be brought to justice quickly. “A week has passed with no information,” one of his sons told the newspaper. “What we cannot take by law, we’ll take by arms,” he said.

Obviously concerned about factional infighting, Washington has weighed in, calling for the TNC to act in a unified manner. US deputy White House spokesman Mark Toner warned on Monday that the TNC faced “a do-or-die moment” to carry out a credible and thorough investigation into the death of General Younis. “It is important, given the fluidness of the situation on the ground,” he said, that the TNC “sends a clear and transparent message that they speak on behalf of the Libyan opposition and the Libyan people.”

In fact, the murder highlights the faction-riven character of the TNC, which comprises an unstable alliance of former Gaddafi officials, Islamists and CIA assets. Far from representing the interests of ordinary Libyans, the TNC is a proxy for NATO and US imperialism, which are seeking to oust Gaddafi and install a puppet regime amenable to their strategic and economic interests.

More than four months after the NATO assault began, there are no signs that the Gaddafi regime is about to disintegrate or be overthrown militarily. Encouraged by the Benghazi infighting, Colonel Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam, told Libyan TV on Monday: “No one should think that with all the sacrifices we have made, and the martyrdom of our sons, brothers and friends, we will stop fighting. Forget it. Regardless of whether NATO leaves or not, the fighting will continue until all of

Libya is liberated.”

Yesterday, the Libyan military fired a missile at the Italian warship Bersagliere, which has been enforcing the NATO blockade of the country. While the missile fell short, the attempt does point to the continuing military capacity of pro-Gaddafi forces.

NATO has already announced there will be no halt to its criminal bombing campaign during Ramadan. Its targeting of civilians and non-military facilities was highlighted on Saturday when NATO warplanes struck Libyan television transmitters, killing three people and injuring 15 others. In a statement yesterday, International Federation of Journalists Secretary-General Beth Costa said: “We utterly condemn this action, which targeted journalists and threatened their lives in violation of international law.”

Inconclusive fighting is continuing around the western coastal town of Zlitan and in the mountains to the south and southwest of Tripoli. TNC fighters from the beleaguered “rebel” city of Misrata claim to have seized control of Zlitan and repelled a counteroffensive by pro-Gaddafi forces. The very limited nature of the alleged military gains underlines the fact that the TNC is no closer to ousting Gaddafi than it was months ago.



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