

# Divisions emerge among Libya's NATO-led "rebels"

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With the US and its European allies set to install a puppet regime in Libya based on the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council, deep divisions have emerged among the NATO-led "rebels". These divisions, which include tensions with elements of Al Qaeda, pose the threat of continued fighting between rival factions well after the overthrow of the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi is completed.

The head of Libya's self-appointed National Transitional Council, who has been anointed by the NATO allies as Libya's interim leader, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, has yet to set foot in Tripoli, where scattered fighting continues.

The armed bands that have seized control of the Libyan capital have given no indication that they accept the NTC's authority. Many of these elements, drawn from the western mountain region and the city of Misrata, have voiced contempt for the collection of ex-Gaddafi ministers, like Jalil, CIA and other Western intelligence agency assets, and tribal politicians based in Benghazi.

Among those who have come forward as the leaders of "liberated" Tripoli is one Abdelhakim Belhadj, who has described himself as the head of the Tripoli Military Council, i.e., the "rebel" military commander.

As the Arabic daily *Asharq Al-Awsat* noted, Belhadj "is also a former Emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which was banned internationally as a terrorist organization following the 9/11 attacks."

Belhadj began his career as a jihadist fighting alongside Osama bin Laden with the CIA-backed Islamist mujahideen in Afghanistan in 1988. He returned to Libya in the 1990s, founding the LIFG and launching an armed insurgency against the Gaddafi government.

It was this insurgency that played a large part in pushing the Gaddafi regime toward an accommodation with Washington and the other imperialist powers. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the CIA forged close ties with Libyan intelligence, collaborating in the suppression of Al Qaeda-linked elements in Libya and

throughout the region.

In the period leading up to 9/11, Belhadj was involved in the running of two Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. A number of Libyans went on to become Al Qaeda's top commanders in Afghanistan, including Abu Faraj al-Libi, who was captured in 2005, and Abu al-Laith al-Libi, who was killed in 2008.

After the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, Belhadj went to Pakistan and then to Iraq, where he collaborated with the Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Captured by the CIA in 2003 in Malaysia, he was subjected to extraordinary rendition to a secret prison in Thailand where he was interrogated under torture. He was then turned over to the Gaddafi regime in 2004. In 2010, he was released after he and other LIFG leaders renounced the armed struggle, except in invaded Muslim countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine.

The presence of Belhadj in the command of "rebels" who have been armed and trained by NATO and whose entry into Tripoli was made possible by massive NATO bombardments raises a number of disturbing questions.

Not least of them, of course, is the significance, as the 10th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, of the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies working intimately with a well-known Al Qaeda operative. On the one hand, it exposes the gross fraud of the "global war on terror," in which two wars of aggression were justified on the basis of the need to defeat Al Qaeda. On the other hand, it points to the extreme recklessness of US and NATO policy in Libya.

It has been widely reported that the LIFG elements led by Belhadj have looted immense amounts of armaments from Gaddafi's stockpiles, including surface-to-air missiles. Their ranks have also been swollen by the freeing of prisoners from Libyan jails, among them hundreds of Al Qaeda-linked militants.

Belhadj's role also calls into sharp question the nature of the "democracy" that NATO is helping to install in Libya, in which radical Islamists are playing a leading role.

It is widely believed that Islamist elements around Belhadj

were responsible for the July 28 assassination of the man then designated as the NTC's military commander, General Abdul Fatah Younis, who defected from the Gaddafi regime in late February of this year.

As Gaddafi's public security minister, Younis had been intimately involved in the suppression of Islamist insurgents in the east of Libya, and it is widely believed that these elements took their revenge. It was also reported that the Islamists suspected the general because of his ties to NATO and opposed his attempts to bring the various armed militias under his command.

The killing has opened up a deep fissure within the Benghazi-based "rebels". Members of Younis' powerful Obeidat tribe vowed last weekend that they would take their own action if the NTC failed to charge the defector's killers. Representatives of Younis' family gave the Muslim holiday of Eid, marking the end of Ramadan, as the final deadline.

The NTC chief Jalil angered members of the Obeidat tribe last week when he announced that action would be taken against Younis' killers "when the higher interests of this revolution will not be damaged."

Members of Younis' family charged that the answer indicated the NTC's subservience to the Islamists. "We need to prevent the tyranny of Gaddafi turning into the tyranny of those ideological groups," Mohammed Hamid, Younis' nephew, told Reuters. "There are those who want the country to be run by militias like Afghanistan."

Reuters commented that the case represented "a steep test" of whether the NATO-backed council would prove able to "sidestep tribal fault lines that could further destabilize the war-battered and heavily-armed country."

Meanwhile, protests broke out in the city of Misrata on Monday after the NTC announced a decision to install a former general in Gaddafi's army, Albarrani Shkal, as chief of security in Tripoli.

Hundreds poured into Misrata's Martyr's Square, chanting that the appointment of Shkal represented a betrayal of the "blood of the martyrs."

Before defecting to the anti-Gaddafi side in May, Shkal is believed to have been a senior officer in the 32nd Brigade, commanded by Gaddafi's son Khamis, which played a leading role in the siege of Misrata.

According to the British *Guardian*: "Misrata's ruling council lodged a formal protest with the NTC, saying that if the appointment were confirmed Misratan rebel units deployed on security duties in Tripoli would refuse to follow NTC orders."

"Behind the protests is a wider grudge between Misratans and the NTC, which many accuse of representing Benghazi rather than Libyans as a whole," the *Guardian* reported, "Misrata's military council continues to refuse to follow

orders from NTC army commanders, and some rebels complain that Misrata's units and those from the Nafusa mountains to the west, have not been recognized as having been the key to the fall of Tripoli."

The controversy calls into question the heart of the strategy announced by the NTC, NATO and the United Nations, which is to reconstitute Gaddafi's security forces along with other state institutions under a new Western-backed puppet government.

Washington and its allies are reportedly determined to "learn the lessons of Iraq", which included the disastrous unraveling of the occupation after the Bush administration ordered the disbanding of the Saddam Hussein regime's military and police. Attempting the opposite strategy of keeping the old regime's security forces intact, however, may produce equally violent results.

Another front in which divisions have erupted has provoked disquiet within one of the Libyan NATO war's principal constituencies, the major Western energy conglomerates.

"Tensions have surfaced within Libya's rebel oil circles," the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "underscoring the complexity of any return to normal in the North African nation after its regime change."

According to sources cited by the *Journal*, the conflict pits "the rebel wing of the National Oil Co., or NOC, and the oil and finance ministry on the one side and, on the other side, managers of a local state-owned oil company that came under the opposition's control early, the Arabian Gulf Oil Co., or Agoco."

The report states that "rebels" in the NOC have denounced the Benghazi-based Agoco for "not consulting" before making deals with foreign corporations. Agoco managers have responded by threatening "to make a strike" over the NOC's interference in their dealings.

The conflict, which clearly is a falling out over the division of spoils that points to a possible break-up of Libya along regional lines, is "complicating the task of foreign companies trying to return to the country," the *Journal* reports.



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