

NATO's client regime in Libya confronts divisions as military offensives stall

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The military push by Libya's NATO-backed National Transitional Council (NTC) to take control of the remaining pro-Gaddafi strongholds appears to have stalled. NTC militias have encountered strong resistance in their advances on Bani Walid, about 150 kilometres south-east of Tripoli, and coastal city of Sirte, the birthplace of ousted Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The NTC had set a deadline of last Saturday to allow for negotiations with local tribal leaders over the terms of a possible surrender. After talks failed, the first probing attacks began but were driven back. The NTC yesterday announced another two-day deadline and called on residents of Bani Walid to leave the town. The siege of the town has resulted in severe shortages of water, food and medicines.

The Associated Press reported yesterday that at least 80 anti-Gaddafi fighters had been killed during attacks on Bani Walid and Sirte over the past few days. Having encountered resistance, the NTC has presented a rather inflated picture of the military strength of Gaddafi loyalists. "Its cities are packed with weapons, missiles and ammunition depots. It is an unbelievable force," Fadl-Allah Haroon, a militia commander, told the Associated Press.

NATO warplanes have continued to pound pro-Gaddafi strongholds. Over the four days to Tuesday, the NATO website reported that more than 450 missions had been flown involving 175 strikes, including on targets near Sirte, Bani Walid and Sabha, a town in the country's south controlled by pro-Gaddafi forces. CNN yesterday reported clashes as a convoy of some 500 NTC fighters moved south toward Sabha.

Gaddafi's son, Saadi, and other relatives and top supporters have fled Libya for Niger and Algeria. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland claimed that Saadi and others were being held under house arrest in the Niger capital of Niamey. Niger has recognised Libya's NTC. The country's justice minister, Marou Amadou, said on Sunday that those guilty of "serious crimes" might be extradited.

Yesterday, NTC head Mustafa Abdul Jalil called on Western powers to provide the NTC with arms. "There will be fierce battles in Sabha with equipment that we do not yet have, and we ask for more equipment to retake these places," he told the BBC.

Jalil, who came to Tripoli for the first time from the NTC's eastern stronghold of Benghazi, met with the US Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman yesterday. Feltman, the highest American official to visit Libya, praised the new regime, dismissed concerns about Islamist influence in the NTC and declared US "commitment to supporting the Libyan people as they chart their country's future."

Feltman's cynical reference to the Libyan people determining their own path is belied by the neo-colonial character of NATO's intervention and the NTC's complete dependence on the Western powers—militarily, politically and economically. Like the other major powers making tracks to Tripoli, the US is primarily concerned about establishing a strategic outpost in North Africa and securing dominance over the country's oil reserves.

French President Nicholas Sarkozy, who is due in Tripoli today, will no doubt be pushing France's strategic and economic interests. On Monday, China formally recognised the NTC in a bid to recover lost ground. The US-backed move to oust Gaddafi was in part aimed at undermining significant Chinese economic interests in Libya and throughout the region.

The fragility of the new NATO-backed regime was underscored by its announcement yesterday that it would remain in Benghazi until after the seizure of the remaining pro-Gaddafi strongholds. The decision will delay the implementation of the NTC's "roadmap," which outlines plans for a new constitution and elections over a 20-month period, allowing the NTC more time to consolidate its grip on power.

The NTC, which is an unstable coalition of former top Gaddafi officials, CIA assets and Islamist tendencies, is already confronting divisions in its ranks. Islamist leaders are openly

critical of the NTC's so-called prime minister, Mahmoud Jibril, who has also acted as the regime's foreign envoy in its dealings with the Western powers. Jibril was head of Gaddafi's national economic development board before defecting to the opposition.

Earlier this week, the Associated Press reported the comments of Anes Sharif, a spokesman for the Tripoli military council. Sharif declared that Jibril had lost the confidence of the population throughout the country and called for his resignation. "He's been living for the last six months outside the country. He is appointing people depending on their loyalty to him, not depending on their worth and their activities in the revolution. We think he's a project for a new dictator," Sharif said. The head of the Tripoli military council is Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a former leader of the Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

Similar remarks were made by an Islamist cleric, Ali al-Sallabi, in an interview with Reuters on Tuesday. Sallabi, who lives in exile in Doha, is part of an Islamist network drawn from former LIFG members and the Muslim Brotherhood. His brother Ismail, another cleric, heads the February 17 Martyrs' Brigade based in Benghazi. In an interview last month with the *Globe and Mail*, the network's leader Mohammed Busidra said he wanted Ali al-Sallabi to challenge for the presidency in future elections.

NTC chairman Jalil's trip to Tripoli was undoubtedly to try to quell dissension within the emerging regime. In a speech in the capital's renamed Martyr's Square on Monday, Jalil appealed for unity and attempted to placate critics. In a nod toward the opposition council in the city of Misrata, which has complained over not receiving enough recognition, he described Misrata as "the Stalingrad of Libya"—a reference to its siege by Gaddafi's supporters. To accommodate Islamist tendencies, he called for a democratic system that "honours Islam" and for the imposition of Sharia law.

Jalil also appealed for the rule of law and called on his supporters not to take revenge against alleged Gaddafi supporters. His comments were pitched to deflect international concern over mounting reports of extra-judicial killings, beatings and arbitrary arrests by NTC fighters, particularly of black Libyans and migrant workers accused of being "mercenaries" for Gaddafi.

An Amnesty International report released on Tuesday declared that opposition forces under the NTC "have also committed human rights abuses, in some cases amounting to war crimes." While downplaying the NTC's crimes as compared to the Gaddafi regime, the report cited instances in eastern Libya in which NTC supporters "shot, hanged and

otherwise killed through lynching" dozens of captured soldiers and alleged mercenaries with impunity. While the NTC declared that it would investigate the allegations, NTC justice minister Mohammed al-Alagi dismissed the incidents as mistakes that could not be considered war crimes.

In his speech on Monday, Jalil warned Libyans not to take the law into their own hands. But an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday made clear that NTC prime minister Jibril was at the same time sanctioning extra-judicial revenge attacks by Misrata militias in the town of Tawergha, which was allegedly used as a staging ground for the siege of Misrata.

The newspaper reported that NTC fighters from Misrata had been torching homes in the largely abandoned town and scrawling racist graffiti such as "slaves" and "negroes" against the largely black Libyan inhabitants. "Every house, school and public building in Tawergha has been ransacked since the Misrata rebels chased out pro-Gaddafi soldiers. At the time, hundreds of families also fled, fearing reprisals. Rebels slaughtered some of the livestock left behind, the carcasses of which are still rotting in the yards of abandoned houses," the article stated.

Addressing a meeting in Misrata on Monday, Jibril gave the green light for further reprisals, telling the cheering crowd: "Regarding Tawergha, my own viewpoint is that nobody has the right to interfere in this matter except the people of Misrata... This matter can't be tackled through theories and textbook examples of national reconciliation like those in South Africa, Ireland and Eastern Europe."

The espousal of vigilantism by the man likely to be the next prime minister is the sharpest indication of the draconian measures that the NATO-installed regime will employ to deal with any political opposition.



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