

New Libyan prime minister installed by NATO-backed regime

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The installation of Abdurrahim al-Keib as the new Libyan interim prime minister on Monday by the National Transitional Council (NTC) only underscored the unstable, faction-ridden character of the regime and its subservience to the US and European powers.

The “election” itself was carefully staged to give the appearance of democracy—NTC members deposited their ballots into a transparent box in a nationally-televised session. This charade could not hide the fact that the Libyan people had no say in selecting the NTC, which is dominated by ex-Gaddafi officials and the long-time assets of Western intelligence agencies.

Al-Keib’s main qualification for office was his acceptability to the NATO powers, which formally ended their predatory war on Libya at midnight on Monday. A relatively obscure figure, Al-Keib has been variously described as an academic, a wealthy businessman and “a scion” of a nationalist family from Tripoli’s old city.

Trained as an electrical engineer, Al-Keib spent nearly four decades abroad, mainly in the US and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Significantly, he was recently a professor at the UAE’s Petroleum Institute—a private body funded by major global energy corporations, including Royal Dutch Shell, BP and Total.

In one of his first statements, Al-Keib expressed the hope that “the world will perceive us as a positive new force,” adding: “I have a lot of trust in the fact that we live in a country that has lots of resources that haven’t been tapped.” He will undoubtedly assist the scramble for control of Libya’s substantial oil and gas reserves—a

major goal of the NATO’s intervention.

The fact that Al-Keib was chosen over other NTC stooges, just as willing to carry out the dictates of the Western powers, is bound up with the regime’s internal divisions. Al-Keib narrowly won the so-called election, with 26 out of 51 votes, amid bitter rivalry between the various tribal, regionally-based and Islamist factions.

The Islamists based around the Qatari-backed clerics—Ali and Ismail al-Sallabi—along with factions based in the cities of Misrata and Tripoli in the country’s west had bitterly criticised the NTC’s previous interim prime minister Mahmoud Jibril. Jibril, who headed Gaddafi’s national economic development board, is from the eastern city of Benghazi, like most NTC members.

The main public criticism of Jibril was that he was constantly out of the country during the fighting to oust Gaddafi. The same, however, could be said of Al-Keib, who only returned to Libya after the fall of Tripoli in August and played no significant role in the war. Al-Keib appears to have been chosen mainly because he comes from a prominent Tripoli family. He lacks an independent base of support, making him a useful compromise figure as the factions battle for power.

Al-Keib indicated that he would form a government within two weeks. The NTC has announced a deadline of eight months for drawing up a constitution and holding elections. Given the sharp divisions inside the NTC, both deadlines are unlikely to be met. The concern of the NTC and its NATO backers has never been the democratic rights of the Libyan people, but securing control over the country and its energy

resources.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland praised the selection of Al-Keib, calling on him to support “human rights” and bring the country’s numerous militia groups under control. The disarming of the militias, which were exploited by the NATO powers to oust Gaddafi, is being treated as a matter of urgency by the US and its allies as they seek to strengthen the NTC’s grip over the country.

The international media, which remained virtually silent on the crimes and abuses carried out by the anti-Gaddafi “revolutionaries,” has started to proclaim the “rogue” nature of the militias, their threat to political stability and the necessity of either disarming them or integrating them into a new national army. Over the past few days, several militia clashes took place in Tripoli, including at the Central Hospital—the capital’s largest medical facility.

Prominent Tripoli militia commander Abdul Hakim Belhadj, who is closely aligned with the Islamist grouping headed by the al-Sallabi brothers, has flatly refused to integrate into a national army without guarantees. His spokesman Anis Sharif told the *Washington Post* on Tuesday: “Creating a new army is not going to be by an official statement or resolution. It has to come after a negotiation.”

While the militias reflect the interests of the country’s feuding factions, their refusal to disarm is also a distorted reflection of the deep distrust felt by broad layers of the population to the new rulers. Anwar Fekini, a French-Libyan lawyer and militia leader, told the *New York Times*: “We are the ones who are holding the power—the people with the force on the ground—and we are not going to give that up until we have a legitimate government that will emerge from free and fair elections.”

Behind the scenes, the rush by foreign governments and energy giants to restart oil and gas projects and establish their stake in new fields continues apace. Last month, Canadian foreign minister John Baird along with others, including Austrian foreign minister Michael Spindelegger and German economy minister

Philipp Roesler, made the trek to Tripoli to press the case for their country’s firms.

As reported in the *Globe and Mail*, Baird was accompanied by executives from three major Canadian corporations—SNC Lavalin, Suncor and Pure Technologies—each of which had significant operations in Libya under the Gaddafi regime. “Obviously we’re fighting for Canadian companies to be able to begin their operations as soon as possible. That’ll be good for the Canadian economy and good for the future of Libya,” Baird baldly told the newspaper.

The Italian energy giant ENI yesterday announced that it had resumed production at its Sabratha offshore gas platform in Libya, with all 15 wells due to be reopened by the end of November. ENI is the largest foreign energy producer in the former Italian colony. Libya accounts for about 15 percent of ENI’s global production and around 11 percent of Italy’s imported gas. On the same day, Italy became the first European state to resume commercial flights to Tripoli.

Libya’s oil production is also resuming. A report on Tuesday showed it has risen to 567,000 barrels per day (bpd), compared to 1.6 million bpd prior to the war. The latest increase stemmed from the restarting of the El Sharara field by the Spanish energy corporation Repsol. The field, now producing 90,000 bpd, is being used to feed the Zawiya refinery in Libya’s west.



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