

Libya autonomy declaration poses threat of civil war

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Following a declaration of autonomy by tribal and militia leaders in oil-rich eastern Libya, the head of the Tripoli-based National Transitional Council (NTC) has threatened the use of force to prevent the country's partition along regional lines.

Nearly five months after the lynch-mob murder of Libya's former leader, Col. Muammar Gaddafi, and NATO's declaration of victory in its war for regime-change, the confrontation between Tripoli and Benghazi, the eastern city where the autonomy decision was taken, raises the specter of civil war.

In a televised address Wednesday from the city of Misrata, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, the chairman of the NTC, categorically rejected the autonomy bid.

"We are not prepared to divide Libya," he said. "They should know that there are infiltrators and remnants of the Gaddafi regime trying to exploit them now and we are ready to deter them, even with force."

At a press conference in Tripoli, Jalil charged unnamed Arab states with funding "sedition" in Libya. "Some sister Arab nations unfortunately are supporting and financing this sedition that is happening in the east," he declared.

Jalil, a former minister of justice in the Gaddafi government, went on to declare the NTC "the sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people" and Tripoli Libya's "eternal capital."

Earlier, the NTC's interim prime minister, Abdel Rahim al-Kib, also rejected any move towards a federated state in Libya, declaring, "We don't want to go back 50 years."

The unstated reference was to the reactionary and corrupt regime of King Idris, which governed Libya until its overthrow by the Nasserite-inspired Free Officers Movement, led by Gaddafi. Idris served as a puppet of US and British imperialism, granting both

military bases in Libya, including the giant Wheelus US Air Force base in western Libya.

After the discovery of oil, Idris served as the pliant tool of the big American oil companies, which wrote the country's petroleum law and were granted virtually unrestricted rights of exploitation. After coming to power, Gaddafi closed down the US and British bases and nationalized a controlling interest in all of the foreign oil companies operating in the country.

The connection between Idris's reign and the separatist movement in the east is very direct. The former king ruled a federated monarchy in which the imperialist powers and foreign corporations dominated. The states—Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitana in the west and Fezzan in the south, territorial jurisdictions inherited from Italian fascist rule and before that the Ottoman Empire—had as much power as the central government. Idris himself resided in Benghazi and considered himself first and foremost the ruler of Cyrenaica.

Sheikh Ahmed Zubair al-Senussi emerged from the conference in Benghazi as the choice of the 3,000 assembled tribal, militia and political representatives for chief of a new interim council of Cyrenaica, or Barqa, as it is known in Arabic. The stated goal of the new council is to revive the constitution of 1951 imposed under Idris.

Al-Senussi, who is a member of the NTC, is also the grand-nephew of the deposed king. He insisted that the autonomy declaration was not a matter of "sedition" and that the Benghazi council had no interest in changing the country's flag or national anthem and would leave foreign policy to the NTC in Tripoli.

However, in an interview with CNN from Benghazi, al-Senussi said that "social things" should be left in the

hands of local governments, including health and education.

Under the Gaddafi regime, a significant portion of the country's oil wealth was channeled into the provision of free health care and education for all Libyans. The proposal to turn these sectors over to regional authorities inside Libya represents a direct threat to the well-being of the majority of the population, particularly when couched in the program of an eastern Libya autonomy movement.

According to the Benghazi-based Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGCO), the territory of Cyrenaica holds fully three-quarters of Libya's oil reserves. Asked by Reuters whether the creation of the new council in Benghazi would change the way in which AGCO operates, a company spokesman answered equivocally, "Nothing until now."

The autonomy declaration in Benghazi is widely seen as a step toward grabbing control over the region's energy wealth, which would entail choking off resources for the rest of Libya.

The move to create an autonomous government based in Benghazi is part of a broader fracturing of Libya along regional lines. Over 100 separate tribal and city-based militias—the forces which NATO backed with arms, advisers and aerial bombardments in the war to overthrow Gaddafi—control much of the country. The NTC, while installed by the US and NATO as the official government, has proven incapable of exerting its control even over the capital, Tripoli, where the main airport and major government buildings remain under militia control.

While the NTC's Jalil blames the threatened splintering of Libya alternatively on unnamed Arab regimes and pro-Gaddafi infiltrators, the more obvious culprits are the US, NATO and the Western European powers. Their seven-month war last year succeeded in destroying the Libyan state and much of the country's infrastructure, while claiming tens of thousands of lives.

The aim of this imperialist intervention was to turn the clock back half a century to the conditions that existed under King Idris, imposing unfettered control over the country's oil wealth and turning Libya once again into a base for imperialist interventions throughout the region.

The fracturing of Libya along regional lines would

facilitate these neo-colonial aims. It also threatens a renewed eruption of civil war and yet another round of bloodletting resulting from a war of aggression waged under the pretext of protecting civilian lives.



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