

Libya wracked by protests targeting government and French forces

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Violence is engulfing Libya's capital city, Tripoli. Coming less than a year after elections that were trumpeted as a vindication of the NATO-led invasion to topple the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, the renewed clashes testify to the tenuous hold that Prime Minister Ali Zeidan's government has over the war-torn country.

Last week, a car bomb blew up outside the French embassy, wounding two guards and several residents and causing extensive damage to buildings nearby. The bombing was thought to be the work of an Al Qaeda-linked group opposed to the French intervention last January in Mali against Islamist forces that had taken control over the northern part of that country. The previous week, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda's North African arm, had threatened retaliation.

Yesterday, a bomb destroyed a police station in the eastern city of Benghazi. There were no casualties.

Only a few days ago, the French parliament voted to extend its military mission in Mali, while the United Nations has raised the prospect of a second "parallel" task force to carry out "anti-terrorist" operations "outside the UN mandate". This special unit is to be set up primarily by France and will be stationed either within Mali's borders or elsewhere in West Africa.

French embassies across North Africa had been on high alert since the bomb attack on the United States consulate and a CIA facility in Benghazi in September that killed the US ambassador and three other officials, and particularly after armed militants seized hostages in the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria, demanding a prisoner release and an end to France's operations in Mali. Thirty-eight civilians were killed in the Algerian army's botched rescue operation.

France worked closely with Qatar and other Gulf petromonarchies, which financed, armed and trained Islamist forces to oust Gaddafi, and is currently working with Doha, as well as Ankara and Riyadh, which are backing

forces including the Al Nusra Front, which is linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, in a sectarian war to overthrow Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad and isolate Iran.

The NATO war undermined the tenuous equilibrium Gaddafi helped keep among Tuareg and other tribal groups in the Sahara. Together with the influence of regional Islamist groups, boosted by NATO's decision to place Al Qaeda-linked Libyans in positions of power, this undermined the Malian military's control over the country's restive north.

Some of these forces sought to wrest control of Mali and its mineral resources from the French-backed military junta in Bamako, cutting across France's geo-strategic and commercial interests in Libya and its former colonies in North and West Africa.

France sent its military into Mali to drive out the Islamist and tribal armed forces. Now, Islamist groups ejected from Mali have moved north, crossing the Sahara through Algeria and Niger back into Libya, fuelling a growing insurgency. The cynical policy of using Islamists to advance France's interests is now backfiring, as it did against the US in Benghazi last year, destabilising the NATO-installed regime.

Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, who flew to Libya, said France "would work with the Libyan authorities to find out who had carried out the attack." This may mean the dispatch of French special forces.

In other incidents, at least 200 gunmen have been surrounding the foreign ministry, the interior ministry and the state news agency since Sunday, demanding that officials who had worked for Gaddafi be banned from senior positions in the new government. On Tuesday, they occupied the finance ministry. Policemen also stormed the interior ministry earlier in the week, protesting pay.

There have been growing protests against former regime figures who still hold important positions. Last March, protesters barricaded legislators inside the Congress

building for hours, insisting they pass a law prohibiting members of the old regime from holding office. Such a law, depending upon how it is implemented, would affect 80 percent of the National Congress, and if extended to the judiciary would remove almost all the judges.

Crucially, it would affect the cabinet, which includes ministers from the National Forces Alliance, the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing, and the Justice and Construction Party, as well as so-called independents, regional leaders and some former regime figures. Their confirmation by Congress last October led to angry protests outside the Congress building, which were dispersed by gunfire from the security forces.

Zeidan was a former diplomat who fell out with Gaddafi in 1980 and lived in exile in Switzerland where he worked as a lawyer. He was one of the founding members of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), which worked for the armed overthrow of the Libyan regime in the 1980s, backed by Saudi Arabia and the CIA.

In 2011, he served as the National Transitional Council's European envoy and played a key role in persuading French president Nicolas Sarkozy to support the anti-Gaddafi forces. His party came second in the elections after the National Forces Alliance.

The NATO-led neo-colonial invasion of Libya in 2011 cut oil output, its primary source of revenue, to virtually zero and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. As a result, the economy contracted by more than 40 percent in 2011, from which it has yet to recover. Libya already suffered from massive social inequality, 50 percent youth unemployment, large economic disparities between the regions, and corruption. All of these problems were exacerbated by the war, which forced a million people to flee their homes.

Libya now functions as a global weapons bazaar, sending arms and fighters to Syria and other conflict areas. Within Libya, there are hundreds of militias, many affiliated to Al Qaeda, which fought in the NATO war against the Gaddafi regime.

These armed brigades now fight pitched battles against rival groups for "zones of influence" in Libya's towns and cities. There were particularly deadly clashes in Zintan and Zuara over who should guard the oil and gas complex in Western Libya belonging to Mellitah, a joint venture between Libya and Eni, the Italian energy group, before the army restored order.

A recent report from the International Crisis Group spells out Libya's pervasive insecurity. Armed gangs proliferate and lawlessness abounds. There is no

functioning justice system in many parts of the country. Armed groups, originally sanctioned by Libya's Transitional National Council, continue to run prisons and enforce their own summary justice systems, including assassinations, torture, abductions, and attacks on government forces.

The government is trying to cut the flow of men and weapons into its southern border region with the help of surveillance equipment supplied by Washington, which has set up a base for drones in Niger, from which it can monitor Mali and Libya. The Libyan government has also completed a 108-mile trench through its southwest desert border area to deter smugglers.

Zeidan is seeking to clear the militias out of the eastern port city of Benghazi, where attacks by Islamist militants are on the rise, but lacks the armed forces to do so. As of last December, the US has been supplying Libya with drones and an Orion electronic warfare aircraft to help it gain control of the city.

The government has launched a crackdown on the militias in Tripoli, with security forces stationed throughout the city. They have emptied several illegal detention centres and seized 36 bases used by the militias.

The continuation of these conflicts and the descent into street fighting expose as a lie the justification for the NATO-led war for regime change—that it would bring democracy and human rights—and the so-called left groups that supported it. These were convenient fictions behind which the US and its allies could advance their interests—by taking control of Libya's oil wealth.



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