

Libya destabilised by factional and military infighting

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Libya Shield Force, one of the many Islamist militias co-opted by the Libyan government to maintain law and order, fired on demonstrators using anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades and mortar fire, killing 31 people and injuring 127 in the eastern city of Benghazi.

The massacre, which took place last Saturday, had the worst single death toll since the formal end of the NATO-driven civil war that toppled the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in September 2011. It testifies to the increasing political turmoil in Libya, where the Western-backed government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan is struggling to maintain any semblance of political authority or independence from his imperialist sponsors.

It may yet presage renewed intervention by the NATO powers in defence of their geo-strategic and economic interests in the energy-rich country.

Benghazi has been beset with violence and lawlessness, with weeks of bombings and assassinations targeting the government's new security forces, in part at least in retaliation for the government's attempts to rein in the militias.

The protestors were rallying outside of one of the Libya Shield's compounds to demand that it disband and submit to government forces. They complained that the government has bowed to the militias, giving them official status under the Interior Ministry's Supreme Security Council (SSC), rather than demanding that they disband. Protestors taunted Wissam ben Hamid, the leader of Libya Shield and its predecessor the Free Libya Martyrs, which NATO had backed as "revolutionaries" against Gaddafi.

The government called in its own forces, but these were too weak to stop the clashes or prevent the slaughter. Libya Shield has since reportedly withdrawn

its forces from the area. Zeidan declared three days of mourning, appointed a judge to investigate the massacre and ordered to break up the militias. Army Chief of Staff Youssef al-Mangoush, who was the militias' chief advocate and had put Libya Shield on the payroll, has resigned. He was succeeded by his deputy, Salem al-Gnaidy, until a new army chief is picked.

Salem al-Gnaidy issued another impotent plea for the militias to put themselves under the command of the Libyan Army and said that he welcomed "any force" that wants to join the army, saying, "We are ready to pay bonuses to those who hand over weapons."

The General National Congress (GNC), Libya's parliament, notably did not issue any direct criticism of the Libya Shield Brigade. It cannot, because it is beholden to Libya Shield and hundreds of other brigades and militias, paying to buy their support since it could not win in any military confrontation.

Libya Shield recently used its monopoly of weaponry to push through the Political Isolation Law, banning anyone from holding government office that was in power under Gaddafi. Supporters of the group surrounded the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs as well as the National Congress building until Congress submitted. The Law is so wide-ranging that it prevents numerous members of Zeidan's government from holding office. It benefits the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties outlawed under Gaddafi.

Zeidan has escaped the Isolation Law "guillotine" after a deal with the militias, whereby the diplomatic post he held decades ago before falling out with Gaddafi in 1980 is exempt. But the deeply unpopular interior minister, Ashour Showail, head of the Benghazi police force when the NATO-backed uprising began,

was forced to resign. He was succeeded by Colonel Mohammed Khalifa al-Sheikh, who said he would maintain most of the existing apparatuses “so as not cause a security vacuum.”

Mohamed al-Magarief, elected as head of Libya’s parliament, was forced to resign last week, days before the law came into force. He served as ambassador to India in 1980 before defecting and joining the opposition and had lived in exile until 2011. He survived an assassination attempt last March at the hands of one of the militias demanding a purge of Gaddafi-era figures.

In his resignation speech, Magarief railed against the backing some legislators had received from the militias, criticising “the use of weapons or the threat to do so outside of the legitimate authority or without its orders.” His resignation has stalled the already fragile Congress, exacerbating the government’s political crisis.

The GNC said it will formally call for nominations to succeed Magarief, as well as for the posts of first and second vice chairman. *Al-Ahram* cited one possible candidate to succeed Magarief as Abdel-Wahab al-Qaid, a member of the Allegiance to the Martyrs bloc and the head of the National Border Guard for southern Libya.

Al-Qaid’s career indicates the character of the political forces brought to the fore by NATO. A former jihadist who fought with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, he is a senior member of the Libyan Islamic Fighters Group. He was arrested and imprisoned in the notorious Abu Salim jail and only released in 2011.

The unstable political and security situation in Libya is wreaking havoc with the economy, which has yet to recover from the devastating war.

Oil and gas account for 70 percent of the country’s GDP and 95 percent of its exports. NATO forces were careful to spare the energy infrastructure from its ferocious firepower, enabling oil production to regain its pre-war level of about 1.5 million barrels a day (b/d) by March last year, with Libya’s new leaders promising an increase to 2 million b/d or more. This rosy scenario has now collapsed.

Production has fallen as workers have struck for higher pay, and the militias have shut down the energy installations to extort cash from the government. Last month, protesters shut down the Feel oilfield in the

south-west, while Tobruk, Ras Lanuf, Zueitina and other ports in the east from where oil is exported have been affected. Energy Minister Abdelbari Arusi said that this had cost \$1 billion in lost revenue.

The Arabian Gulf Oil Company, part of Libya’s National Oil Company that operates in the east, has been unable to replace its crucial power-generation equipment at the Sarir and Misla oilfields. Output will soon fall from 380,000 b/d to around 300,000 b/d, a loss of \$8 million a day at current prices.

US, British and French corporations withdrew some of their staff after the attack last January on a gas plant in neighbouring Algeria, close to its border with Libya. The oil firm BP, which had planned to start new drilling in 2011, withdrew more of its staff after militias seized control of the capital Tripoli and attacked the French embassy.

Facing a desperate political situation, Zeidan has appealed to the US for help in establishing a new military force, made up of fresh “non-militia” recruits. He attended a two-day meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels at the end of last month and secured its agreement to provide “technical assistance in terms of training” and send a “fact finding” team to Libya.

NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said, “I believe that this would be a fitting way to continue our cooperation with Libya after we successfully took action to protect the Libyan people two years ago.” At last year’s Chicago summit, NATO had invited Libya to become a Mediterranean Dialogue partner.

The US has sent additional rapid reaction forces to reinforce a separate Marine Air Ground Task Force, to a base in Sigonella, Italy, which carries out training missions in Africa. Eileen Lainez, for the Pentagon, said in reference to Libya, “The unit, which is temporarily deployed to Sigonella, is aimed at providing a quick response in the region if required.”



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