

CIA-linked general launches Libya coup bid

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Heavily armed militiamen reportedly loyal to a retired general with deep ties to the US Central Intelligence Agency stormed Libya's parliament building Sunday with armored vehicles and heavy weapons, seizing its speaker and armed forces chief Nouri Abusahmain together with some 20 other officials and setting the building on fire.

The assault, which the General National Congress described as a "coup," came just days after the Pentagon ordered some 200 US Marines deployed to a forward operating base in Sicily for use as a "crisis response" force in Libya. "We're doing this as a contingency because we believe that the security situation in North Africa is deteriorating to a point where there could be threats," a Pentagon spokesman said. US military officials speaking not for attribution made it clear that the focus of the mission was Libya, where Washington apparently knew that major violence was impending.

The Saudi monarchy evacuated all of its personnel from Libya Sunday, following similar actions by Algeria and the United Arab Emirates. All cited threats of violence. Three years after the US-NATO war that ended in the toppling and murder of former leader Muammar Gaddafi, Libya, a battleground for competing Islamist and other militias, is the model of a so-called failed state.

The leader of the latest military revolt is a former Libyan army general, Khalifa Haftar. A supporter of the 1969 military revolt led by Colonel Gaddafi that overthrew the US and British-backed monarch, King Idris, Haftar was captured during the 1980s Libyan intervention in Chad and then released at Washington's request, becoming an "asset" of the US Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA moved him to Virginia, near the agency's headquarters in Langley, and helped him set up training camps for a "Libyan National Army"—the same name he has given to the collection of military and militia units now fighting to overthrow the regime in Tripoli.

When the US and NATO launched their war for regime change in Libya three years ago, Haftar was airlifted back into Benghazi to assume military command of proxy forces on the ground as the US and NATO bombarded the country. He was supplanted in this role, however, by a former

Gaddafi interior minister, Abdel Fatah Younis, who was himself subsequently assassinated. He was then eclipsed by the Islamist militias who came to dominate the NATO-backed ground forces.

Haftar made an abortive coup attempt last February, posting a video of himself in full military uniform calling for the suspension of the General National Congress and the government and the formation of a committee to "rescue" Libya from chaos. No coup materialized, however, and the government brushed the gesture aside.

Haftar's latest assault, dubbed "Operation Restore Libya's Dignity," was initiated Friday in the form of a full-scale offensive against the Islamist militias that have dominated the eastern city of Benghazi. The fighting resulted in the deaths of at least 80 people and sent large sections of the population fleeing for safety. Warplanes and helicopters were employed in the bombardment of bases controlled by Islamist militias, including Ansar al-Sharia, the group implicated in the September 2012 attack on a US consulate and CIA "annex" that resulted in the deaths of the US ambassador and three other Americans.

The government in Tripoli responded by declaring a "no-fly zone" over Benghazi—ironically the same device employed by the US and NATO to launch their neo-colonial war three years ago. It appears, however, that the order was directed against Libya's own air force and had no effect. Also participating in the operation were elements of Libya's special forces units, though their commanders claimed that they were neutral.

"We will not give up until we achieve our goals," Haftar told reporters Saturday. "This operation has a precise goal, which is the eradication of terrorism."

It appeared that the military offensive enjoyed at least some popular support and drew in some tribal militias, which were apparently seeking revenge for killings carried out by the Islamists. Benghazi has seen a continuous bloodletting in recent months, with assassinations, car-bombings and other killings, many of them attributed to the Islamist militias that the regime in Tripoli has designated as part of its security forces. Among the most recent actions was the assassination of a local intelligence chief.

According to witnesses in Tripoli, Sunday's attack on the parliament was carried out by the so-called Zintan militia, which hails from the town of that name about 80 miles southwest of Tripoli. It has exercised considerable power in the capital since the toppling of Gaddafi, including over the city's airport, has expressed hostility to the Islamists and has staged previous attacks on the parliament.

After the attack, however, a military police chief, Col. Mukhtar Fernana, made a televised pronouncement in the name of Haftar's "Libyan National Army" declaring the dissolution of the General National Congress and affirming that Libya would not become a "home for terrorists."

For its part, the government called upon the Islamist militias to respond to the coup and confront "attempts to take over power" in Tripoli.

Large sections of the population regard the General National Congress and the Libyan government as illegitimate. The congress, composed of Islamist forces, ex-Gaddafi elements and criminal gangs, unilaterally extended its mandate—which was supposed to end in February—until the end of the year. The country has gone through three prime ministers since then. Islamist elements managed to force out Ali Zeidan, a secularist exile politician and former diplomat, last March. They were seeking to consolidate a new government under Ahmed Maiteeg, following a vote that was denounced by their opponents as fraudulent. The assault on the parliament came on the same day that a new cabinet was to be selected.

Significantly, statements from Washington and its allies failed to include any declarations of support for the government in Tripoli or denunciations of the coup attempt. Instead, State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters Monday, "We reiterate our call for all parties to refrain from violence and to seek resolution through peaceful means." She added that Washington backs "a democratic and peaceful means to bringing about stability in Libya, but there's a great deal of fluidity on the ground."

Similarly, the European Union declared it was "deeply concerned" by the Libyan events, while calling "on all parties to build consensus so as to ensure a transition to a stable democracy." And NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told a press conference in Brussels "all parties" should "refrain from violence and engage in a constructive national political dialogue."

These declarations represent, at the very least, a hedging of bets as to who will wind on top, if not tacit support for the coup led by Haftar.

Three years after the US-NATO war for regime change, Libya is in a state of disintegration. Last month, oil production, the source of 95 percent of the government's revenues, fell to an all-time low of 215,000 barrels a day,

just 13 percent of installed capacity. The unemployment rate is estimated at approximately 30 percent, and some 1 million people remain internally displaced. Armed militias are engaged in rampant violence, while running a network of clandestine prisons and torture centers in which thousands languish.

Given Haftar's historic ties to the CIA, there is every reason to suspect that Washington stands behind the coup. At the same time, however, US policy in the region has been characterized by sharp internal differences over the utilization of the Islamist elements that Haftar is attacking as instruments for pursuing US imperialist interests.

Islamists, including a former Al Qaeda militant who had been held prisoner at Guantanamo, played a prominent role in organizing the ground forces that were backed by US-NATO air power in toppling Gaddafi. After the so-called "revolution," these same forces have played a significant role, in collaboration with the CIA, in funneling arms from Libyan government stockpiles and foreign fighters into the bloody civil war in Syria, where Washington is backing Islamist militias in an attempt to bring down the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

These arrangements blew up in the face of the Obama administration in the September 11, 2012 attack that killed Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three aides. While Republicans in Congress have attempted to whip up a scandal over an alleged administration cover-up, none of them have shown any inclination toward investigating the real source of the attack, which was a falling out between the CIA and its Islamist allies.

Whether Washington has decided, three years after overthrowing and murdering Gaddafi, to settle accounts with these elements and install Gen. Haftar, one of Gaddafi's former comrades, as a new US-aligned military strongman should become clear in the coming days.



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