

Another Stinging Blow for the Libyan Rebellion

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The killing of Libyan rebel military commander General Abdel Fattah Younes could lead to a violent split inside anti-government forces and comes as a major rebel offensive is failing to produce significant gains prior to the onset of the holy Muslim month of Ramadan in August when extremely hot weather and all-day fasts makes warfare very difficult and slow.

The death of the general, whose body along with those of two senior aides was reportedly found badly burnt on Thursday, brings into focus a complex and extensive web of power relationships and rivalries spanning both sides of the conflict. This is evidence of just how fluid the situation in Libya is, with multiple layers of loyalties that can shift in any given moment.

The specter of a North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) ground invasion of Libya, once frightfully close, has receded. The Western bravado of just a month ago – when British, among other officials, were preparing detailed plans of Libya’s post-Muammar Gaddafi future – [1] has largely disappeared, challenged by a combination of events on the ground, the lack of political will by member states to send troops, and loud protests from Russia, China and other significant international players.

As the latest round of negotiations between Gaddafi, NATO and the rebels falter, the Libyan civil war is increasingly turning into a conflict over natural resources. This means, in part, that both sides are digging in for a protracted war. Moreover, it lends support to fears that a factitious civil war motivated by greed will ensue, like in so many other parts of Africa.

The consequences could include the collapse of central authority, at least in parts of the country, low-intensity tribal warfare, and the long-term proliferation of violence in Libya and the region.

The main alternative is no less frightening: Gaddafi re-conquers the country and puts down all dissent with an iron fist. Even that would be a Sisyphean task, given the massive proliferation of weapons and the radicalization of the population since the start of the violence. It took Gaddafi several decades to fully take control of the country after the coup that brought him to power in 1969.

News of the death of General Younes came shortly after the rebel leaders announced his arrest; subsequently, they clarified that he had been summoned from the front to be questioned over suspicions that he had secretly aided Gaddafi. The murder allegedly occurred while he was on his way back, and the leader of the group that killed him was apprehended. As of Friday morning, however, no further information was released, and there are several hypotheses about who might be responsible.

Younes, who had unofficially been considered Libya's number two after Gaddafi prior to his defection in February, had been a close associate of the colonel ever since the coup in 1969. As interior minister, he was responsible for the brutal suppression of dissent on a number of occasions over the years, and many rebels reportedly had persistent doubts about his loyalty.

The apparent failure of the recent rebel offensive against the oil town of Brega, resulting in multiple casualties, seemingly triggered a new round of suspicions against him. The rebels blamed many of their losses on "betrayal by traitors", as one commander told al-Jazeera 10 days ago. [2]

In early April, Gaddafi's daughter Aisha insinuated during an interview that Younes was still loyal to her father. Gaddafi also reportedly put a large price on Younes' head, so the interview may well have been an attempt to discredit him inside the rebel camp, but it is important to note that fleeting loyalties are a characteristic of the Libyan conflict.

Numerous government soldiers have defected, including senior officials; the government claims that many rebels have defected back. During the early protests, Western journalists were often surprised to see the same people participating in an anti-Gaddafi protest one day, and a pro-Gaddafi rally the next one.

It is possible that Younes had multiple loyalties. This also means that it may not become clear who was behind his murder for a very long time. While the rebels have claimed that a pro-Gaddafi cell assassinated him, many believe that the rebel leadership was implicated. The New York Times reports:

[M]embers of his tribe - the Obeidi, one of the largest in the east - evidently blamed the rebel leadership for having some role in the general's death.

The specter of a violent tribal conflict within the rebel ranks touches on a central fear of the Western nations backing the Libyan insurrection: that the rebels' democratic goals could give way to a tribal civil war over Libya's oil resources. Colonel Qaddafi has often warned of such a possibility as he has fought to keep power, while the rebel leaders have argued that their cause transcends Libya's age-old tribal divisions. [3]

Some reports speak of a larger split inside the rebel camp, between defectors who were long-time allies of Gaddafi and revolutionaries with a clean past.

Yet in Libya, a "clean past" is something very difficult to define. To add to the complexity of the situation, Younes' chief rival in the rebel camp was General Khalifa Hifter, who defected in 1987 and lived in the United States before returning in March to join the rebellion.

Hifter, who is reportedly widely trusted by the rebels due to his "clean" past, is allegedly affiliated with the US Central Intelligence Agency. This raises the possibility that the US clandestine service might be in some way implicated in the assassination.

Add to this that money and resources are quickly becoming the main goals of the warfare. It is not a coincidence that the most recent rebel offensive focused on the important oil town of Brega in the east. "The battle in Libya is slowly moving from territory to resources," al-Jazeera's Anita McNaught reported a week ago. [4]

Money has also been a central goal of the Libyan rebels' diplomatic drive to be recognized as the legitimate Libyan government by other countries. [5] They are seeking tens of billions of dollars of frozen Gaddafi assets abroad, as well as urgent aid of several billion dollars for military supplies, salaries, food and medicine.

Some sources go as far as to speculate that the rebels may be hoping to raise a mercenary army to fight Gaddafi in the future; while this information cannot be confirmed, there are many questions surrounding the identity and the behavior of rebel forces. Even reports that are sympathetic to them, such as al-Jazeera's, reveal that they are not as democratic and peace-loving as they are often described as. [6]

The United Nations has previously accused them, as well as Gaddafi's forces, of war crimes. [7] The murder of Younes, if it was perpetrated by some of them, would be a high-profile example of brutal tactics employed by their forces. If reports attributing atrocities to them continue to emerge, this could undermine their international legitimacy and NATO's campaign.

In any case, NATO, seemingly the only thing that reliably props up the rebel forces, is on a strict, if unacknowledged, timetable. Many member countries are running out of political will and money to finance the war. Besides, autumn is the season of sand storms in Libya, when the effectiveness of air power will be greatly diminished.

With the prospects of a ground intervention in Libya receding, the twin scenarios of a collapse of the rebel front and a power vacuum in the country take the center-stage. In the next month (Ramadan), we can hardly expect the rebels to defeat Gaddafi by force. After that, they may lose their main ally.

In a way until recently an unwanted scenario - the orderly partition of Libya between Gaddafi and the rebels, with separate power and economic bases in each part - is gaining new glitter for the latter. The alternative - a crushing defeat or a fragmentation of the rebel forces - with sectarian and criminal interests taking precedence - is becoming more and more possible each week that passes. The nightmare scenario would be a new Somalia on the Mediterranean coast.

Notes

1. [Libya after Gaddafi](#), Asia Times Online, 5 July 2011.
2. [Libyan rebels pushed back from Brega](#), al-Jazeera, 19 July 2011.
3. [Death of Rebel Leader Stirs Fears of Tribal Conflict](#), The New York Times, 28 July 2011 (registration required).
4. [Libyan rebels fight for resources](#), al-Jazeera 21 July 2011.
5. [Seeking to free funds, U.S. recognizes Libya rebels](#), Reuters, 15 July 2011.
6. [Alleged abuses take shine off Libya's 'freedom fighters'](#), al-Jazeera 13 July 2011.
7. [Libya conflict: UN accuses both sides of war crimes](#), BBC 1 June 2011

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