

SLIPPING INTO CHAOS: After Libya, NATO Intervention Threatens To Destabilize the Entire Region

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One year after the NATO intervention, Libya faces disintegration as the oil-rich eastern region seeks semi-autonomy.

Libya seems to be on the verge of disintegration one year after the military intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the first week of March, leaders from its oil-rich eastern region, which includes Benghazi, the focal point of the Western-backed rebellion that ousted Muammar Qaddafi, announced their intention to seek “semi-autonomy” from the central government. The meeting in Benghazi, where the decision was taken, was attended by major political leaders, military commanders and tribal leaders from the region. The new “semi-autonomous” region, Cyrenaica, will extend from the central coastal city of Sirte, Qaddafi’s hometown, to the country’s border with Egypt. According to energy experts, the area holds around two-thirds of the country’s oil reserves.

Observers of the Libyan scene predict that the move is aimed at partitioning the country. At the Benghazi meeting, there was an open call for the re-adoption of the 1951 Constitution, which recognised Tripoli as the administrative capital and Benghazi as the financial capital of the country.

Under King Idris, the pro-Western puppet ruler at the time, Libya was divided into three provinces, Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitana in the west and Fezzan in the south. Benghazi, where the King resided, was the centre of decision making. The United States had military bases nearby while big Western oil companies monopolised the country’s oil resources. After Qaddafi came to power, he nationalised the oil industry and forced the U.S. to vacate its bases.

Sheikh Ahmad Zubeir al-Sanussi, who has emerged as the leader of the Benghazi group, is a grand-nephew of King Idris. The Benghazi meeting rejected the decision of the Libyan Transitional National Council (NTC) to allocate 60 seats to the eastern region in the 200-member Assembly. The leaders are demanding around 100 seats for the region. Elections for a new government are scheduled to be held in June. But with a powerful Western-backed power bloc emerging in the east and general lawlessness prevailing in most parts of the country, it would be an uphill task for the interim government in Tripoli to supervise a peaceful transfer of power to an elected Assembly.

Over 100 militias, flush with lethal arms, are bunkered down in the major towns of the country. They are unwilling to integrate into the national army or give up their arms. In the

capital, Tripoli, the main airport and major government buildings are still under the control of opposing militias. Frequent clashes have erupted in the capital and other parts of the country as each militia has been trying to expand its turf. The seven-month-long war inflicted by the NATO forces not only claimed thousands of lives but also destroyed the country's infrastructure.

Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the NTC Chairman, has described the Benghazi declaration as "the beginning of a conspiracy against Libyans" which could lead to the eventual disintegration of the country. He blamed "some Arab nations" for encouraging the secessionist moves. Qatar, which was among the early backers and sponsors of the counter-revolution against Qaddafi, is said to figure prominently on the list of the Arab countries behind the conspiracy. Senior officials in Tripoli have been critical of the interference of the tiny but rich Gulf emirate in the internal affairs of the country following the ouster of Qaddafi. Abdel Rahman Shalgham, Libya's Ambassador to the United Nations, had famously asked, late last year, "Who is Qatar?" He was angered by Qatar's continued interference in the internal affairs of Libya and its backing of Islamist militias and politicians.

In statements issued earlier in the year, Mustafa Jalil had said that Libya had descended into a state of "civil war". Sirte, which was reduced to rubble by NATO bombing, is occupied by fighters from Misrata. Tens of thousands of Qaddafi supporters continue to languish in jail. International agencies have provided graphic accounts of the torture they endured at the hands of their captors. Many citizens, including a former Libyan Ambassador to France, Omar Brebesh, died following brutal torture in prison. The town of Tawergha near Misrata has been depopulated forcibly because its residents supported Qaddafi. Amnesty International, in a report on Libya released in February, has documented details about the widespread abuse of human rights in the country. A spokesman for the organisation said that militias in the country "are largely out of control of the government".

Navi Pillay, the chief of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), asked the Libyan authorities to take control of the prisons. "There is torture, extrajudicial killings, rape of both men and women," she said in late January.

The NATO-backed government in Tripoli has said that it will guarantee the primacy of Sharia law in the country. Under Qaddafi, women enjoyed considerable freedom. Polygamy was banned. A man needed his wife's legal consent to get a divorce. Qaddafi had encouraged women to join the workforce. The interim government has announced that it will relax the strict rules against polygamy.

The majority of the anti-Qaddafi militia leaders, despite being backed by the West, are avowed Islamists. Libyan militia leaders are now coordinating with the Free Syrian Army fighting against the government in Damascus. The Russian Ambassador to the U.N., Vitaly Churkov, has accused the Libyan government of training Syrian rebels in Libyan camps and then sending them back to Syria.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has given instances of migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa being targeted for detention and summary executions by the militias. Baso Sanggu, the President of the U.N. Security Council and South Africa's Ambassador to the U.N., said that NATO had to be investigated for human rights abuses. NATO air raids resulted in the death of thousands of innocent civilians. The destruction of Sirte is mainly the handiwork of NATO forces. A new U.N. report has concluded that NATO has not sufficiently investigated the air

raids it conducted over Libya. The U.N. had mandated a “no-fly zone” over Libya with the overt aim of protecting civilians. NATO drones and Special Forces had played a key role in facilitating the capture of Qaddafi. He was later tortured and shot by his captors. The report also said that the militias were continuing with their “war crimes”.

Another report, by the West Asian Human Rights Groups, which included the Arab Organisation of Human Rights, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and the International Legal Assistance Consortium, released in January, concluded that there was strong evidence to implicate NATO in war crimes in Libya. “NATO participated in what could be classified as offensive actions undertaken by the opposition forces, including, for example, attacks on towns and cities held by Qaddafi forces. Equally, the choice of certain targets, such as regional food warehouses, raises prima facie questions regarding the role of such attacks with respect to the protection of civilians,” the report stated.

The mission found the strongest evidence of NATO war crimes in the city of Sirte. The U.S. had spent around \$2 billion for its “special operations” which finally led to the grisly assassination of Qaddafi. France and Britain were the other notable NATO countries that played a key role in guaranteeing regime change in Libya. Qatar and Saudi Arabia opened up their purse strings and launched a propaganda blitz through the auspices of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya respectively, demonising Qaddafi and whitewashing the sins of the Libyan militias and their patrons.

There are reports in the Arab media that Qaddafi loyalists have started regrouping under the banner of the “Green Resistance” movement. Al Ahram, the Egyptian newspaper, reported that Green Resistance fighters had recently stormed the prison in Misrata and killed 145 guards. There are claims that hundreds of fighters owing allegiance to the new government have been killed by the resistance since the beginning of the year.

The Tuareg ethnic group, which stood by Qaddafi until the very end, while siding with the resistance, has also linked up with its kinsmen in neighbouring Mali and Niger. The Tuaregs, known for their distinct style of dressing and nomadic lifestyle, have been demanding a separate state. Well-armed Tuareg groups have, in recent months, attacked towns in Niger and Mali. Sophisticated arms in the Libyan armoury have trickled down not only to militant Islamist groups but also to groups fighting to overthrow governments in the Sahel region bordering Libya. NATO’s military intervention in Libya now threatens to destabilise the whole region and beyond.

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