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Libya's Rebel Leaders and Western Assistance

by Jamsheed K. Choksy and Carol E. B. Choksy

Libya's interim National Transitional Committee (NTC), the coordinating organization for a wide range of anti-Qadhafi factions, was established on March 5, 2011, at the rebel city of Benghazi. Swiftly recognized by France as the government for the whole country, a few NTC leaders subsequently met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and also with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Paris on the sidelines of the G8 meeting there.

The White House already contemplates releasing frozen Libyan assets worth around U.S. \$30 billion to the NTC, and arming its forces as well. E.U. nations are thinking along the same lines. But U.S. ambassador to Libya, Gene Cretz, like his European counterparts, cautions, "We're still trying to find out who the rebels are and if they are 100 percent kosher." For now the U.S., Britain, and France are defending – through a no-fly zone and by aerial bombardments on pro-Qadhafi forces – not just civilians but relatively unknown revolutionaries, at a cost of over U.S. \$100 million each day.

So can Libya's rebellion be successful at home, turn into a constructive model for the Arab uprisings across the Middle East, and provide a positive contribution to the world as a whole?

The Rebels' Goals

Savvy in gaining international attention, the NCT set up its own website, with Arabic and English versions, "to connect with our people at home and abroad, and to deliver our voice to the outside world." Via its website, the NTC claims to derive its legitimacy "from the decisions of local councils set up by the revolutionary people of Libya." Video clips posted there depict high-ranking officials from cities and tribes declaring allegiance to the Council and the superpowers' militaries assisting its fighters.

The NTC's stated goals are to: "Steer Libya during the interim period that will come after ... the destruction of Qadhafi's oppressive regime. It will guide the country to free elections and the establishment of a constitution." Yet the NTC does not mince words on how the near-term could pan out: "Either we achieve freedom and race to catch up with humanity and world developments, or we are shackled and enslaved under the feet of the tyrant Muammar Qadhafi."

Who are the Rebel Leaders?

The cast of opposition leaders that may determine Libya's future contains many individuals once close to Qadhafi:

- Mustafa Mohammed Abdul Jalil Fudail, who used to serve Qadhafi in many capacities including most recently as the Minister of Justice, now acts as Chairman of the NTC.

- Mahmoud Jibril, who obtained a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh and went on to work for Qadhafi as a management and planning expert, has been appointed the rebel's Prime Minister.
- Ali Al-Issawi, whose PhD is from the University of Bucharest and acted as Qadhafi's Minister of Economy, Trade, and Investment and subsequently as Ambassador to India, will be the new Minister of Foreign Affairs.
- Abdul Faten Younis, a general, longtime ally of Qadhafi, and former Interior Minister, has become the NTC military's Chief of Staff.

Others however have been opposed to Qadhafi for quite a while, including:

- General Omar al-Hariri, who participated in the 1969 coup against King Mohammad Idris al-Mahdi, fell out of favor in 1975 when he organized a failed attempt to oust Qadhafi and so was imprisoned for fifteen years, will guide the NTC's military affairs.
- Fathi Tirbil Salwa, an attorney and anti-Qadhafi activist, will function as the NTC's liaison to Libya's youth who make up 30 percent of the population.
- Ali Al-Tarhouni, a prominent student opponent of Qadhafi's who fled Libya in 1973, obtained a PhD from Michigan State University, and became a senior lecturer in economics at the University of Washington, will become Minister of Finance.
- Mustafa Gheriani, another Benghazi-based activist, will serve as the NTC's official spokesman.

What are their Motives?

Despite the younger talent, several of Qadhafi's old cronies are lining up with the populist uprising hoping to at least save their hides and at most to profit politically and financially. So, for Libyans' aspirations of freedom and representative government to succeed, removing Qadhafi from power is a first step. If the rebels gain control of Libya, they will then have to grapple with those individuals within the NTC linked to 42 years of repression. How events play out in Libya will set an example for the rest of the Arab world.

When introduced to the press at Benghazi, Dr. Tarhouni admitted lack of cohesion among the rebels could lead to the current despot being replaced by his former allies: "There was a total vacuum [of power]. I think it was reflected in the makeup of the Council. We will clean it up, I promise you." Tarhouni's words bode ill for an orderly transition, hinting at a struggle between former cronies of Qadhafi, long-term opponents of his, and younger activists and fighters who are paying the struggle's bloody price.

On a positive note, no one in the NTC leadership has links to Al-Qaida, the Muslim Brotherhood, or hard-line mullahs in Iran. But this too could change if leadership struggles break

out and factions need external support to prevail. Islamists among the Sunnis and Shi'ites are keen to help steer Libya's political future toward fundamentalism and militancy.

So if the NTC and its "Mad Max" style rebel forces do crush Qadhafi, the rebellion may not bring appropriate change but could represent the political survival of an old guard linked to the Middle East's mad dog or even the rise of Islamism. Moreover, it is unclear if the NTC has the skills and resources to effectively address socioeconomic problems such 30 percent unemployment in addition to bringing about national reconciliation after the bloody civil war.

The West's Roles

The NTC established its own Central Bank of Libya based at Benghazi. But fiscal resources in rebel-held cities are modest. Qadhafi is likely to use up all the assets in Tripoli – estimated by the IMF at U.S. \$ 100 billion in cash and U.S \$ 6 billion in gold – before he goes down. So the rebels have requested Britain deliver to them approximately 1.4 billion Libyan dinars (equivalent to U.S. \$1.1 billion) printed in London for, but as yet not handed over to, Qadhafi's Ministry of Finance, on top of the funds held by Washington.

The NTC even set up its own Libyan Oil Company to channel petroleum revenues to the rebels. Before the rebellion broke out, Libya was producing 1.6 million barrels of sweet crude oil per day. However, with oil production in Libya at a standstill, it is only a matter of time before any new government in Tripoli will turn to the West for reconstruction aid. Leaders in Washington, London, and Paris speak of billing a new Libyan government for the cost of military and other assistance, but if past foreign interventions are a roadmap then collecting those expenses is a longshot.

Yet there can be a silver lining to all this turmoil and sacrifice. Libya's inevitable financial needs can serve as a means for effecting long-term good among its people. Before the West provides such aid, it would be most prudent to ensure the funds will indeed assist most Libyans through reconstruction of social, political, and economic institutions. If not, as often happens in such endeavors, the foreign funds will flow into the private coffers of opportunistic turncoats. Likewise the U.S. and its global partners can provide constitutional advice and bureaucratic guidance to help steer a nascent Libyan administration toward the goals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in a free, stable, and transparent society. If not, instability will lead once more to a whimsical autocracy in Libya that could become anti-Western like Qadhafi's regime.

The rebels' only realistic hope of success is through foreign assistance. So if the U.S. and its E.U. partners help bring the NTC to power, they should utilize their influence to steer Libya's new powerbrokers into a constitutional and fully-representational system of nation government. Then Libya will no longer be a global threat through weapons of mass destruction or sponsorship of terrorism like under Qadhafi. It could resume being a major supplier of petroleum to energy-hungry Europe and Asia. Through all those ways, Libya would rejoin the community of nations as a valuable and valued partner.

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