

Libyan regime begins to disintegrate

by Ali el Montasser

Since the American raid on Libya in April, a rapid process of erosion has occurred within the top command of the so-called Libyan Revolution. A *fin de règne* atmosphere has shrouded the major decision-making centers in Tripoli, Benghazi, and the military base of Sebha. Tribal conflicts, previously contained by the uncontested preeminence of Colonel Qaddafi, have erupted once again, pitting the Qaddafadam tribe against the Magharha. There is also trouble brewing among the Tuaregs. This *fin de règne* situation is the reason for the recent and serious assassination attempt against Major Abdesalam Jalloud (May 15) and an even more recent failed hit against Qaddafi himself.

Not only has the emotionally unstable colonel entered into a deep depressive phase (he suffers from severe manic depression), but it has been recently ascertained that he is suffering from cancer. While this latter fact has not yet been made public, other than in these columns, Qaddafi's ill health has not been lost on his own colleagues of the Revolutionary Council. It has merely intensified the wild Darwinian struggle for power now shaking up the regime's leadership.

The key to the unfolding situation lies in the behind-the-scenes planning of the two superpowers for the region as a whole. While the U.S. raid failed to remove Qaddafi or destroy the oil wells of the Jamhariyya, it severely destabilized the regime. Nonetheless, it was not so much the U.S. action as the ostentatious withdrawal of Soviet naval forces and some ground personnel some hours before the raid, that has derailed the Libyan leadership.

There are a number of reasons for this, the least important of which was the Soviet calculation that the eternally troublesome colonel was not worth a superpower confrontation. In refusing to commit themselves fully to Qaddafi, the Soviets in reality were concentrating on longer-term goals. The central Soviet strategic option in the Near and Middle East has always been, and remains Iran, for reasons which relate to the long-term Soviet geopolitical objective to enlarge their land mass southwards. Support of Qaddafi has always been an important, though peripheral Soviet concern, while Russian long-term planning has always sought dominance of Central Asia and Iran.

Moscow's leadership considered the "risk" of losing Qaddafi or alienating him acceptable, knowing that they control at least two of the four conceivable successors to Qaddafi in the Revolutionary Council.

Since the assassination of Col. Hassan Skhal last year, there remains only a small group of possible "successors" should the present regime survive: Major Abdessalam Jalloud, one of the first intimates of Qaddafi among the "young officers" who led the coup in 1969, and for years now responsible for the very important portfolio of oil; Col. Abdelhafiz Messaoud, long the head of the key Libyan military base of Sebha and organizer of the Islamic Legions, was recently given the responsibility of reorganizing the armed forces; Khalifa el Hanesh, head of all intelligence activities and an East German secret-service agent; Mohamed Majdoub, who plays an important role behind the scenes in the revolutionary committees; the two Qaddafadam brothers, who have always played a key role in intelligence; and the titular head of Libyan foreign intelligence, Col. Belgassim Ali Younes. The head of the armed forces, Gen. Younes Abu Bakr, could also play a role.

The attempted assassination of Jalloud in May and the follow-up attempt on Qaddafi's life are the first acts of an unfolding scenario. It is no secret that the Qaddafadam tribe, Qaddafi's own, was responsible for the attack on Jalloud. It is said that elements loyal to Jalloud answered in June against Qaddafi.

At present, given Jalloud's position as number two in the regime, the "Jalloud case" is the focus of all attention. Over the years, Jalloud has distinguished himself as an apparently faithful follower of Moscow—witness his recent trips to the Soviet Union, apparently on behalf of the Libyan leadership. Yet, at the same time, Jalloud, as head of all of Libya's international oil operations, has established excellent contacts in the West, most notably with the CIA through American oil companies, and, through similar cut-outs with French foreign intelligence. Jalloud is part owner of a half-dozen companies headquartered in Switzerland, some of which are partially owned by Americans with known connections to U.S. intelligence.

This explains the reluctance of American oil companies to leave Libya beyond obvious mercantile interests. These companies have prepared for all eventualities by setting up cut-out companies in Malta and Greece to trade in Libyan oil. Switzerland, which buys 50% of its oil from Libya, will certainly become the center of these new activities.

Since there is virtually no doubt that Qaddafi will disappear from the scene in the medium term, the real question is whether the dubious Jalloud emerges as the new strongman. There is good reason to believe that some hard-line Soviet-bloc agents such as Khalifa el Hanesh will act to shorten Jalloud's tenure in life under such circumstances.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union will be concentrating on its real grand game in the Middle East: the Persian Gulf and Iran itself.