

Thanks to superpower deals, Qaddafi survives . . . for now

by Omar al Montasser

In the early days of October, another assassination attempt was made against lunatic Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi. Perpetrated by an army officer, the assassination was narrowly averted by some of Qaddafi's new bodyguards, a mixture of Palestinian guerrillas and Lebanese Druze mercenaries, backed up by elements of the Kurdish Workers's Party (PKK).

No one was surprised at the attempt. Only a few days earlier, Qaddafi had lambasted a group of Army officers over defeats in Chad. Adding insult to injury, he proclaimed, "Omar al Mukhtar has only produced daughters," referring to the Libyan hero of the anti-Italian resistance during World War II. Many Army officers were not ready to swallow such an insult, even were they *not* being blamed for Qaddafi's own mistakes.

Indicative of Qaddafi's precarious situation, the discovery of the assassination plot has not led to a purge of the Army. Instead of going public to denounce "world imperialism" and "Zionism," his usual tack, Qaddafi and his immediate associates have chosen to remain silent. Indeed, after so many military setbacks in Chad, Qaddafi is walking a tight rope.

Even the reconquest of the city of Aouzou in northern Chad did not bolster his prestige. The Libyan Army knows that the victory was no feat of military genius, but rested on the deployment of thousands of tons of bombs, including napalm and chemical weapons, against a Chadian enemy which had been deprived of air cover. Qaddafi bears the ultimate responsibility for the Chad defeats in the popular mind. And, he needs his Army for a new and more spectacular offensive in Chad, upon which his political—and physical—survival may depend.

According to reports coming from Gen. Abu Bakr Younis's headquarters, thousands of soldiers have deserted in recent months. Most have found refuge in their traditional tribal areas. Were an attempt made to arrest them, a full-fledged tribal war could result.

Thus, committed as he is to a new offensive, Qaddafi has had no choice but to send to the front in the southern desert the elite Army units heretofore deployed around key government facilities and for his own personal protection. It was to replace them that Qaddafi hired several thousand Lebanese volunteers, Druze, Kurds, and Palestinian followers of Georges Habash. His own personal protection is now guar-

anteed by some of the best-trained fighters of al Fatah, on loan from Yasser Arafat.

Help from the State Department

Obviously, Qaddafi has survived this long only because he enjoys superpower support. He has Soviet support, of course, and oodles of East German "advisers" to go with it. But his ace in the hole is the support of the U.S. State Department, and its "regional matters" negotiations with the Kremlin.

In early summer, Qaddafi accepted a bargain offered by Washington as part of the State Department's "regional matters" sell-out of America's friends around the world. Typically, Washington promised that it would cease all activities aimed at either killing or overthrowing Qaddafi, in exchange for visible signs of "moderation" by this lunatic.

First discussed in early spring in Tunis during a meeting between U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Vernon Walters and Revolutionary Council member Khawaldi al Hamidi, the bargain was finally struck in early July during Qaddafi's much-publicized visit to Algiers.

With the backing of both Moscow and Washington, the Algerians were encouraged to get closer to Libya, including acceptance of a Qaddafi proposal for a "union" between the two countries. While Qaddafi meant by "union" a full merger of the two countries, Algiers understood and accepted merely joint ventures in the social, economic, industrial, and political fields. However, Qaddafi eagerly accepted the bargain, which not only gave him breathing space, but could be perceived as a consolidation of his regime by his opponents.

A reconciliation with exiles

On the bilateral issues with Algeria, Qaddafi had to promise to stop supporting the Islamic fundamentalist faction associated with pro-Nazi former Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella. Algeria promised to mediate between Qaddafi and his opponents, and during this very visit to Algiers, the ruling Algerian FLN organized a meeting between Qaddafi and the Cairo-based Libyan opposition leader, Abdel Mohein al Houni. In the several hours of discussions, a protocol was established for broader negotiations.

Al Houni's own demands related to a new Libyan constitution, the creation of an opposition party, and the release of political prisoners. Qaddafi agreed to most demands, and

went on to explain at length to al Houni how "idiots" in the Libyan Army had dragged him into a war in Chad which he didn't want. Al Houni left Algiers satisfied and went on to spend several weeks in the United States.

Keeping to its side of the bargain, the U.S. State Department informed those Libyan oppositionists who didn't want to join in the game, that support for their organizations would be curtailed.

On Sept. 1, al Houni and National Assembly opposition leader Mahmoud Soleyman al Maghreby were present in Tripoli for ceremonies marking the anniversary of the 1969 "Libyan Revolution." They then left together for Geneva, establishing a "committee of coordination" among the Libyan exiles. By the end of the month, al Houni had convened his own "National Alliance" in Cairo to draft a "national charter of reconciliation" with Qaddafi. During November, a delegation of eight opposition leaders is supposed to visit Libya from the United States, Western Europe, and Egypt.

Whether this spectacular reconciliation with his exiled foes will actually take place is now in doubt, however. One of the demands that Qaddafi had to agree to, was a purge of his Revolutionary Committees. In his meeting with al Houni, Qaddafi had complained that the committees were "making decisions without consulting me." To replace the committees, Qaddafi is working on the creation of a political party like the Arab Socialist Union of Nasser's Egypt and the early days of his own regime.

Sabotage from within

Many members of the Libyan People's Congress, created in 1976, have a lot to lose in this process. Committed to abort it, they are arguing that the reconciliation with the Libyan exiles is an American ploy, to stage a military coup from within. They have also been responsible for a wave of provocative statements on the upcoming "merger" between Tripoli and Algiers, which have produced doubts in Algeria as to the ultimate usefulness of the process.

Algiers never had any intention of allowing Qaddafi to meddle in Algeria's internal affairs. Now, aware of strong resistance from within Libya, they consider a "wait and see" attitude the best. Similarly, American media, which kept silent while the negotiations were ongoing during the summer, have begun expressing sudden worry on the front pages about the process. Apparently, Chad's President Hissène Habré still has a few friends in Washington who are not keen on the idea of Chad, or any other country for that matter, being sacrificed on the altar of a new superpower deal.

In any case, turmoil can be predicted for Tripoli in the immediate future. While the traditional Army is less than enthusiastic about the unwinnable war against Chad, Qaddafi has also succeeded in antagonizing his traditional base, the Revolutionary Committees he created as a counterweight to the Army. The next assassination attempt may come from that quarter—and could be more successful.

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