

Reports suggest French intelligence encouraged anti-Gaddafi protests

By Alex Lantier
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Reports have emerged in European media alleging that efforts by French intelligence to destabilize or topple the Libyan government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi may have played a role in last month's protests in Benghazi, which ultimately led to war in Libya.

The National Council, a Libyan rebel group based in Benghazi and led by ex-Gaddafi regime officials, appealed to the Western powers for military support. The US, Britain, and the French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy then launched a war against Libya on March 19.

Allegations of French intelligence involvement center on a March 23 report by journalist Franco Bechis in the right-wing Italian daily *Libero*, headlined "'Sarko' manipulated the Libyan revolt." He highlights the strange case of Nuri Mesmari—Gaddafi's former chief of protocol, who fled to Paris in October—and claims that Mesmari put French officials in contact with military officers and activists in Benghazi plotting against Gaddafi.

To a large extent, Bechis bases himself on dispatches from French business intelligence site *Maghreb Confidential*. On October 21 of last year, *Maghreb Confidential* reported, "Muammer Kadhafi's [i.e., Muammar Gaddafi's] chief of protocol, Nouri Mesmari, is currently in Paris after stopping off in Tunisia. Normally, Mesmari sticks closely to his boss's side, so there's some talk that he may have broken his long-standing tie with the Libyan leader."

A prominent pro-free-market reformer in the Libyan ruling elite, Mesmari played a critical role in the Gaddafi regime. He coordinated visits to Libya by foreign heads of state and their use of Libya's fleet of private jets. He also oversaw the state's payments to Gaddafi's children, who have become major business leaders in Libya by taking state funds.

Jeune Afrique, a French news magazine on African affairs, commented that Mesmari's case was "nourishing the most contradictory rumors. The 'Guide' [i.e. Gaddafi] allegedly slapped and insulted Mesmari during the Arab-African summit of October 9-10 in Syrte [Sirt]. This was the man's last public appearance before the revelation, on October 22, that he had fled for France."

On November 18, *Maghreb Confidential* wrote, "The comings and goings of Nouri Mesmari have been stirring a lot of curiosity in recent weeks. The protocol chief of Muammer Kadhafi, who seemed to be joined at the hip with Libya's leader, travelled to France at the end of October, passing by way of Tunisia. Officially, Mesmari, who suffers from a chronic illness, came to Paris for an operation. His wife and daughter indeed visited him, staying for a while at the Concorde Lafayette hotel in Paris. He has since dropped out of sight. Mesmari, who reportedly wants to go into retirement, is one of Kadhafi's closest confidantes and knows pretty well all of his secrets."

On the same day, *Maghreb Confidential* reported talks between French and US wheat growing interests—including France Export Cereales, FranceAgrimer, Soufflet, Louis Dreyfus, Glencore, CAM Cereales, Cargill, and Conagra—and Libyan state-owned mills. These included National Flour Mill Co. in Benghazi, and National Company for Flour Mills & Fodder in Tripoli.

The French ruling class was intent on boosting its market share in Libya. Before a December 14-17 visit—by French banks Crédit Agricole and Société Générale, engineering firms Alstom and Thales, and construction firm Lafarge—*Maghreb Confidential* wrote: "French firms are determined to climb higher in the ranks of Libya's trading partners. Italy is currently in number one position, with China second and France a distant sixth."

According to Bechis, however, these visits provided cover for French military officials to sound out opposition in the Libyan military.

Interestingly, the wheat-trading visit was originally scheduled for October, but French officials postponed it to November, citing the October oil strikes in France. This meant that the visit took place after final signature of the November 2 military alliance between Britain and France, the two main European powers bombing Libya.

The Franco-British alliance included an agreement to carry out a March 21-25 long-range bombing exercise, code-named South Mistral, resembling the long-range

bombing of Libya that began on March 19. The exercise was cancelled due to the outbreak of war.

According to the French air force's Southern Mistral web site, "On November 2, 2010, France and Great Britain signed an unprecedented agreement on defence and security. The Franco-British exercise Southern Mistral falls within the scope of this treaty. It is scheduled to take place from 21 to 25 March 2011 on several French air bases. On this occasion, the French and British forces will perform Composite Air Operations and a specific air raid (Southern Storm), delivering a very long range conventional strike."

Commenting on the November wheat-trading visit, Bechis writes that it was "on paper a commercial expedition to get juicy contracts in Benghazi. But there were also French military men in the group, disguised as businessmen. In Benghazi they met a Libyan air force colonel, Abdallah Gehani. He was above all suspicion, but Gaddafi's ex-protocol chief had revealed that he was ready to desert and that he had excellent contacts in Tunisian dissident circles. The operation was carried out in great secrecy, but news reached the people closest to Kadhafi. The colonel got suspicious."

On November 28 Gaddafi issued an international arrest warrant for Mesmari on unspecified embezzlement charges, and Mesmari was arrested the next day in France.

While in custody, he reportedly gave extensive information to the French government on Libya. *Maghreb Confidential* wrote on December 9, "Fearing for his life, Mesmari has asked for political asylum. Officially, Libya claims he embezzled money. Formerly close to Muammer Kadhafi, he has been described as a 'Libyan Wikileaks' because of everything he knows about the regime. Anticipating that others might defect, Tripoli is confiscating the passports of several officials, including foreign minister Mussa Kussa, who is also being investigated for fraud."

On December 15, however, the Versailles appeals court released Mesmari, ruling that the conditions of his detention were "irregular." After his release, Mesmari remained under the protection of the French government, in a series of luxury hotels in Paris.

Over the next month, a series of Libyan officials were sent to Paris to lure Mesmari back to Libya. Bechis writes, "On December 16 it was Abdallah Mansour, the head of Libyan television, who tried. French authorities arrested him in the entrance of the [Concorde Lafayette] hotel. On December 23 more Libyans arrived in Paris: Farj Charrani, Fathi Boukhris, and All Ounes Mansouri." These are reportedly members of the anti-Gaddafi February 17 movement in Benghazi.

The situation in Libya became far tenser in January, as working-class protests spread throughout neighboring

Tunisia, forcing Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's resignation on January 14.

Gaddafi's son Moatassim spent a week in Paris unsuccessfully trying to convince Mesmari to return to Libya: "Moatassim Kadhafi, left Paris alone on February 5. The son of Muammer Kadhafi, who had been staying at the luxury Bristol hotel since late January, failed to persuade Nuri Mesmari to return home. Kadhafi's former chief of protocol, Mesmari was officially in Paris for medical reasons but was briefly held by the French authorities after Libya issued an arrest warrant against him. While claiming 'everything has now been resolved' with Libya, Mesmari seems reluctant to return without iron-clad 'guarantees.'"

As the Gaddafi regime took increasing security measures, it arrested the man Bechis named as France's central contact in Benghazi, Colonel Abdallah Gehani. On January 27 *Maghreb Confidential* reported, "General Aoudh Saaiti, head of military intelligence in eastern Libya (Benghazi), a historically rebellious region, has been ordered to crack down on any demonstration of sympathy for the Tunisian revolution. The central government reproaches some officers of spending too much time on social networks on the Internet which tend to fan protests. Several officers have been arrested, including air force colonel Abdallah Gehani."

On February 17 *Maghreb Confidential* wrote, "Benghazi has long been a thorn in Colonel Kadhafi's side. Libya's second-largest 'Egyptian' city has historically been a hotbed of rebellion, and it is living up to its reputation. Of eight activists arrested in recent days, six belong to the February 17 Movement, named after the bloody crackdown on anti-government demonstrators in Benghazi on February 17, 2006. They are Farj Charrani, Fathi Boukhris, Ali Ounes Mansouri, Safiddin Hilal Sahrif, Jalal Kouafi, and, of course, [Jamal] Al Hajji."

Bechis comments, "But it was too late: Gehani had already prepared a revolt in Benghazi with the French."

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