

# Western-backed rebel forces encircle Libyan capital

By Alex Lantier  
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NATO warplanes are bombing Tripoli, as Western-backed forces affiliated to the Transitional National Council (TNC) continue to launch ground offensives with NATO air support to encircle the Libyan capital. The US press increasingly claims that the TNC will soon defeat the Libyan government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, against whom NATO has waged war, using the TNC as its ground forces, since March.

Pro-TNC tribal forces from the Nafusa Mountains, armed by countries including France and the Persian Gulf sheikhdom of Qatar, have advanced on Zawiyah and Gharyan. Fighting continued yesterday in Zawiyah, though the TNC claims to control the city's oil refinery—the last functioning refinery in Libya—and to have cut off supply routes through Zawiyah connecting Tripoli to Tunisia.



With TNC forces now holding Gharyan, they can also block an oil pipeline to Tripoli and cut Tripoli off from pro-Gaddafi forces to the south. TNC forces based in Misrata are also advancing on Tripoli from the east, attacking the city of Zlitan.

NATO jets bombed Tripoli yesterday, while NATO officials claimed that their raids on Thursday had destroyed four military targets as well as anti-aircraft installations in Tripoli.

AFP and AP correspondents in Tripoli reported growing electricity blackouts and cutoffs of cell phone service. According to MSNBC, families are “fleeing their homes to avoid a possible rebel assault on Tripoli.”

The International Committee of the Red Cross warned of a “rapid deterioration in the humanitarian situation,”

while officials of the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) are preparing for a mass exodus of immigrant workers from Tripoli. So far, only about 600,000 of Libya's estimated 1.5 to 2.5 million foreigners—largely Asian or African migrant workers attracted by the relative wealth of Libya's oil economy—have left the country. Many of those who stayed fled to the capital to escape violence in other parts of Libya.

IOM spokeswoman Jemini Pandya described plans to evacuate thousands of Egyptian workers stranded in Tripoli: “We are looking at all the options available, but it will probably have to be by sea. ... We have a very limited window of opportunity to carry out this operation because of the fighting.”

Western and TNC officials are making statements apparently designed to terrorize the population of Tripoli into surrendering. TNC leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil said that “the noose is tightening” and that he foresaw a “veritable bloodbath” in Tripoli, which he blamed on the continued resistance of Gaddafi and his loyalists.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini demanded that the population of Tripoli turn against Gaddafi: “We hope the people of Tripoli, who unfortunately are already fleeing, understand the regime has harmed its own people and will therefore join a process of political change to cut off room for maneuver for Gaddafi's regime.”

Despite Frattini's attempt to present NATO as driven by concern for the Libyan population, the TNC's military successes are due to a ruthless bombing campaign by US and European forces against Libya.

Derek Flood, an analyst with the Jamestown Foundation think-tank who is now in western Libya, told CNN that TNC forces are “dependent on NATO,” adding: “they wouldn't act without NATO softening up the targets first.”

NATO mounted several days of air strikes on Zawiyah

before the rebels advanced, making a dozen “key hits” according to NATO spokesmen, before the TNC advanced on Zawiya. British bombers also sank a boat carrying Libyan soldiers apparently attempting to flee the city. Micah Zenko of the US Council on Foreign Relations told CNN that NATO coordinates its bombings with TNC forces through a network of “retired” Special Forces soldiers and “military contractors” operating on Libyan soil.

These events expose the false and hypocritical claims by the Western powers that their military intervention in Libya aimed to protect civilians protesting the Gaddafi regime. In fact, NATO is fighting an imperialist war, carried out with disregard for Libyan lives, to install a right-wing regime at the center of a region shaken by mass revolutionary struggles against US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia.

The major powers are also apparently attempting to negotiate Gaddafi’s departure from Libya. On Monday former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin attended talks between Gaddafi regime officials and TNC representatives on the island of Djerba, off Tunisia. He told the French daily *Le Parisien* that the talks were “extremely difficult” but declined to comment further, saying this would threaten to undermine the talks’ success.

The regime with which NATO intends to replace Gaddafi has the most right-wing, reactionary character. The TNC has drawn up a 14-page “constitutional declaration” in Benghazi, which was shown to AFP. It lays out the foundation for a right-wing Islamist government in Libya. It states, “Libya is a democratic and independent state. The people are the source of authority, Tripoli is the capital, Islam is the religion, and Islamic sharia [traditional law] is the principal source of legislation.”

The document was reportedly written by Islamic activist Mohammed Busidra, who granted an interview to Canada’s *Globe and Mail* daily on August 5. The paper reported that Busidra is “organizing Libya’s mosques into a political machine. This has made him, in the view of many people here, the figure who will wield the most political power, and likely control the country’s leadership, in the event of the dictator’s demise.”

Busidra presented his vision for an Islamic fundamentalist and pro-imperialist puppet state in Libya. He assured the *Globe and Mail* that he would “remain favorable toward the West and its governments and oil companies.” The inescapable conclusion is that Libya’s

42 billion barrels of oil will be de-nationalized and seized by Western oil firms.

Busidra also insisted that alcohol and homosexuality should become strictly illegal in Libya, as well as “the praise of any religion other than Islam.”

The *Globe and Mail* explained, “Mr. Busidra’s network is formidable: it includes the long-banned Muslim Brotherhood; the February 17 Martyrs’ Brigade, which is the largest fighting force among the rebel armies and is led by the influential cleric Ismail Al-Sallabi; the even more popular cleric, Mr. Sallabi’s Doha [Qatar]-based brother Sheikh Ali Sallabi; and a half-dozen other imams and leaders well known in Libya, including more moderate former members of the long-banned Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Mr. Busidra’s circle is opposed to the extreme Islam of Al Qaeda and other radical groups.”

The distinction the *Globe and Mail* makes between members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and Al Qaeda is largely imaginary, however. The LIFG was founded by Libyan veterans of the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war, and thus shares historic ties with Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda grew out of the Maktab Al Khidamat, the group that oversaw international recruitment, funding, and re-supply of Muslim volunteers for this war.

The US government, for one, openly asserts that the two groups work closely together. In its announcement of a \$1 million reward for the capture of LIFG member Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the US Rewards for Justice program asserts that al-Rahman “recruits and facilitates talks with other Islamic groups to operate under Al Qaeda. He is also a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Ansar al-Sunna. Atiyah has been in regular contact with senior ranking Al Qaeda leaders.”

The collaboration between far-right Islamist groups and the NATO countries further exposes the cynicism of the “war on terror” waged by the US and the European powers. While citing Al Qaeda as an absolute evil that justifies war and deep attacks on democratic rights, they can collaborate with similar forces when it suits their imperialist interests.

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