

French-backed Libyan militia airstrike kills 42 civilians

By Alex Lantier
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On Monday, a month after military strongman Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) bombed a refugee detention camp near Tripoli, killing 44 people, LNA aircraft repeatedly bombed a government building in the southern Libyan city of Murzuq. In three strikes, they killed 42 people and left over 60 wounded, including 30 in critical condition. Victims of the bombing reportedly included guests from a wedding that had recently taken place at a nearby venue.

Murzuq municipal councilman Ibrahim Omar reported that 200 local dignitaries had assembled at the building "to settle social differences." He added, "No armed or wanted people were among them. ... Haftar bombed unarmed civilians." Omar called for humanitarian aid, saying that the local hospital was overflowing and could not cope with the large number of casualties from the bombing.

The LNA released a statement declaring that it had targeted "Chadian opposition fighters," which, according to Al Jazeera, is a phrase that in LNA briefings "usually refers to Tebu tribesmen opposing them in the area." Haftar's forces had occupied Murzuq, the center of an oil-rich region in the southwest of the country, in April. However, the LNA apparently lost control of it after sending many of its forces northwards to attack Tripoli.

The House of Representatives of the rival Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli issued a statement that the LNA's bombings "have gone beyond war crimes to crimes against humanity."

Responsibility for the atrocity in Murzuq lies above all with the NATO imperialist powers. After going to war with Libya in 2011, backing various Islamist and tribal militias to destroy Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime and plunging Libya into a decade of bloody civil war, they are now waging a bitter proxy war across the country.

After the LNA bombing of the Tajoura refugee camp

near Tripoli last month, US officials vetoed a neutrally worded UN Security Council resolution drafted by the UK, calling for a cease-fire.

Monday's attack in Murzuq came the day after French President Emmanuel Macron called Egyptian military dictator Abdel Fattah El Sisi, one of Haftar's main backers, to discuss strategy in Libya. The Egyptian State Information Service reported that Sisi "reiterated that Egypt supports efforts exerted by the Libyan National Army (LNA) to fight terrorism and uproot terrorist organizations that pose threats to security of both Libya and the Mediterranean region."

Tensions are rising with the Italian government, which funds the GNA to operate coastal patrols and build concentration camps to keep refugees from reaching Italy. Rome has repeatedly demanded a "unified" European position on Libya, trying to compel France to support the internationally recognized GNA.

While France has consistently backed Haftar against the Italian-backed GNA, which officially has UN recognition, Washington also appears to be swinging behind the LNA. In April, as the LNA attack on Tripoli began, Trump spoke personally with Haftar via telephone, effectively giving him the green light. Reversing earlier calls by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for a cease-fire in Libya, the White House released a statement hailing "Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources."

This statement provoked mass protests in Tripoli. Marchers put on yellow vests in solidarity with mass protests in France against Macron and held aloft signs denouncing Macron and Sisi.

Andreas Krieg, a King's College London professor, told *Le Point*: "It seems intense joint lobbying by Haftar and the United Arab Emirates has borne fruit, persuading the White House that Haftar's LNA could be a partner to work with, despite the mounting evidence of war crimes ...

The idea that Haftar alone can win a decisive victory in Libya has met with a favorable response in the entourage of US National Security Advisor John Bolton.”

Haftar’s latest atrocity has not prompted any change of course on the part of his imperialist backers. Paris, which is emerging as Egypt’s largest supplier of weaponry, was silent on the Murzuq bombing yesterday, launching joint naval exercises with Egypt in the Mediterranean.

Yesterday, fighting between LNA and GNA forces continued. LNA forces carried out air strikes on Misrata’s air college, and GNA forces retaliated by striking Al Jufra airbase, reportedly a key logistics and transport base for LNA forces attacking Tripoli. As the LNA offensive on Tripoli continues, an airliner landing Monday with 124 passengers at the city’s Mitiga International Airport barely escaped incoming fire. The fighting around Tripoli has left 1,093 dead, 5,572 wounded and over 100,000 displaced, according to the World Health Organization.

This is a devastating exposure of the pro-imperialist petty-bourgeois postmodernists, like Bernard Henri Lévy or New Anticapitalist Party candidate Olivier Besancenot, who hailed the 2011 war in Libya as a democratic revolution. The war handed power to a motley group of CIA assets, opened the oil-rich country to imperialist plunder, and led to the building of a network of refugee concentration camps. Despite the “democratic” rhetoric with which the war was marketed, assault, rape, slavery and murder are all common occurrences at the EU-funded camps in Libya.

Haftar has been a CIA asset for over three decades, defecting to an anti-Gaddafi militia in 1987 as France waged a proxy war with Libya along the border with Chad, shortly after the 1986 US bombing of Libya. His militia dissolved shortly after Idriss Déby, the French-backed dictator of Chad, took power in a 1990 coup. After spending two decades living near CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, Haftar returned to Libya shortly after the NATO war began in 2011 to lead NATO-backed “rebels” fighting the regular Libyan army.

After the puppet regime set up by NATO following Gaddafi’s defeat and murder collapsed into open warfare between its factions in 2014, Haftar emerged as the main military leader in eastern Libya. Opposing several of Libya’s Islamist militias as well as the Tripoli regime, he receives support from neighboring Egypt as well as France, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. He now commands a force of 25,000 consisting of militia troops rotating around a nucleus of 7,000 regular troops armed

by Egypt and France with armor and dozens of Russian- or French-made fighter-bombers.

French imperialism, apparently now with some level of US support, is calculating that Haftar is best positioned to defend its neo-colonial interests in northern and sub-Saharan Africa. After European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, who is Italian, criticized Macron’s Libya policy as “a historical and dramatic mistake” amid Haftar’s offensive against Tripoli in April, Venezuela’s TeleSUR pointed to the bitter oil rivalries underlying the Franco-Italian conflict.

It wrote, “The oil fields in al-Wafaa and al-Feel, which have previously been exploited by the Italian company ENI, stand abandoned. With their silent support to Khalifa Haftar, France bets on privileged rights in the country’s energy sector. This stands in direct competition with Italian interests. It should come as no surprise that French President Emmanuel Macron visited his counterpart in Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, at the end of January. Sisi is the greatest ally to Haftar and has provided military support for his forces.”

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