The role of the Libyan army in the revolt against Gaddafi's regime

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In spite of the atmosphere of suspicion which has surrounded the Libyan armed forces since the Al-Fateh Revolution of October 1969, it has played and could play a major role in the popular rebellion which was ignited on 16 February 2011. Among the many questions raised about Libya since the uprising began, the loyalty of the army, with an estimated 76 000 soldiers, to Gaddafi's regime is an extremely important one. While it is possible that some members of the Libyan army intentionally opened fire on demonstrators intending to kill them, or that others bombed crowds of protesters in Tripoli and Benghazi, there are soldiers in the same army who refused to shoot at their fellow citizens, and joined the revolt, swelling the ranks of the demonstrators, and who flew their planes to Malta. Furthermore, there are other questions which ought to be addressed: What is the actual composition of the Libyan armed forces? Why has the army been considered, for many years, a marginal player in the arena of internal politics? What is the future role which the army might play in a post-Gaddafi Libya?

Marginalisation of the armed forces

Compulsory military service for all Libyans dates back to 1984. Every Libyan, male or female, who reaches the age of majority receives formal military training as long as he or she can endure it in terms of his or her health and physical capacity. Both conscripted soldiers and volunteers are in the army which consists of 45 000 troops; the navy has 8 000 members; and the air force has 23 000. According to scant available data and reports that have been issued (for example, by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and the US Library of Congress), Libya boasts 'huge military resources'. However, the Libyan government has been reckless in how it has maintained 'the largest military reservoir in the world'. The army, moreover, suffers from a general absence of standards which should apply to its equipment, as well as labour problems and poor maintenance services. Despite the lifting of international sanctions in 1999 (with European countries lifting their arms embargo in 2004 to allow Libya to combat illegal immigration into Europe), the Libyan army still lacks competence and efficiency, and is incapable of being effectively mobilised.

Although the country had experienced a military coup headed by Gaddafi himself, the Libyan army cannot be regarded as the dominant force in the country or to be in control of it. It is, in fact, forced to share in the steering of domestic politics with other role players, both official and unofficial. The heart of the regime is the Revolutionary Committees and the General People's Congress. Both institutions were set up in 1977, and enjoy the support of other political role players, such as Gaddafi's intelligence services, the Free Officers' Unionist Movement, and, more recently, by a new organisation called the People's Committee for Social Affairs.

In fact, since the establishment of the new regime, the Libyan leader has been continuously targeted by coup attempts which attempted to overthrow him. The first such attempt was by the then-minister of defence, Colonel Adam al-Hawaz, on 11 December 1969. In 1975, two members of the Revolutionary Command Council – Bashir Hawadi and Umar al-Muhayshi – were sentenced to death after an abortive coup. Thereafter, a number of other officers were executed on 22 April 1977, followed by the supreme commander for the military region of Sirte, Hasan Ishkal (one of Gaddafi's in-laws), in November 1985. There were rumours that Ishkal had also planned another coup. A 1993 military uprising backed by the Warfalla tribe also proved unsuccessful. That uprising led to the unleashing of brutal repression against the rebels. These few examples of attempted military coups explain the regime's lack of trust in the military institutions, and lay bare the reason behind the Libyan leader distancing the army personnel from his inner circle. Additionally, the armed forces have been subjected to heavy pressure, and their foundational pillars have been weakened by the regime's efforts to set up a popular army

founded on the participation of all citizens – through general conscription and the recourse to popular militias. To achieve this goal, the regime abolished traditional military ranks and promoted the creation of a quasi-military structure.

The quasi-military apparatus

The mission of these quasi-military forces is internal repression and monitoring, with the goal being the creation of an internal counterbalance to the regular armed forces. The most important quasi-military forces in the country are the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Islamic Pan-African Legion – a group of mercenaries from various parts of Africa who Gaddafi recruited for a number of campaigns in different African countries in the 1970s and the 1980s. These forces comprise of 3 000 and 1 000 troops respectively. There are two further quasi-military bodies which operate in the country: a) the popular militias, whose number totals 40 000, and who are allocated the task of regional defence; and b) the People's Cavalry Force.

Apart from these forces, there are seven other military units that were specifically designed to protect the heart of the system and its leaders. These include the elite 32 Brigade headed by Gaddafi's son Khamis, who holds the rank of captain. Two other sons of Gaddafi, Mu'tasim-Billah and Saadi, are in charge of other security bodies. The strength and the extent of security organisation of these security forces are unclear, and they are thus difficult to assess. Compared to the formally organised armed forces, these security bodies and quasi-military forces appear to be supplied with better and more updated equipment. It is, however, difficult to confirm their effectiveness on the ground, or their power to confront an internal conflict that might take a long time to resolve.

The army and the tribes

While there are doubts about the loyalty of the regular armed forces, Gaddafi's immediate family, as well as other members of his Qadhadhafah tribe and the tribes that are allied to it, provide the most important building blocks of military leadership in the country. Based on that, we find in Major Ahmad Gaddaf al-Dam, the former supreme commander for the Barqa region, until his resignation from the post of the official responsible for relations with Egypt, or in Major Syed Muhammad Gaddaf al-Dam, the general coordinator of the People's Committee for Social Affairs, two clear examples of blood relations which connect these officials to the leader of the Libyan revolution. Gaddafi, in fact, tends to appoint only those closely related to him to crucial posts within the military and intelligence apparatuses.

Another figure worth mentioning in this regard is Colonel Abdullah al-Sanusi, who belongs to the Maqariha tribe, and who had been in charge of the Jamahiriya Security Organization since 1992. He was fired by Gaddafi during the second week of the recent revolt. Al-Sanusi epitomises a second category of elite supporters in Gaddafi's inner circle, a category consisting of a blend of tribal alliances with special ties to the ruling family (the inner circle of Gaddafi's in-laws). The third circle of select adjuncts of the regime comprises of the Qadhadhafah tribe which has enjoyed the privilege of seeing its loyal members appointed to high-ranking positions for the sake of safeguarding the regime. Such members are exemplified, for instance, by Major Mas`ud Abd al-Hafiz Ahmad, the former Commander of the Libyan army in Chad, and later the secretary of the People's Committee in the municipality of Sebha, Fezzan region, a post he has occupied since 1998. The last circle of loyalists of the Libyan leader includes his allies from the Maqariha and Warfalla tribes. Apart from al-Sanusi, other notables include Abdul-Salam Jaloud, who used to be the second most prominent political personality in the country

before Gaddafi decided to marginalise him in 1993. Both men belong to the elite of close supporters of the regime.

Despite Gaddafi's public addresses which have displayed hostility to tribalism and have insulted tribes as 'reactionary forces' related to the old, pre-Gaddafi regime, the tribal factor has not disappeared from the Libyan scene. This is indicated by the tribal configuration of the armed forces. Thus the tribal factor has endured as a crucial element helping one to understand the method of governance in Gaddafi's Libya. Indeed, all the 1969 free officers (who engineered the coup that overthrew King Idris) came from small tribes, and most were of rural origins. Furthermore, tribalism has acquired a greater role in the past few decades, particularly in light of the near-total hegemony exercised by the Qadhadhafah tribe over the air force from which, by contrast, officers belonging to the Warfalla tribe have been excluded. The concatenation of tribal links, which is not limited to the regular military forces, witnessed an expansion in its sphere of influence to such a point that, as described by one writer, it turned into a 'reconstruction of tribalism' within Libyan society. This was attained by the renewed participation of tribes in political activities through grass-roots institutions and the People's Committee for Social Affairs. There is no doubt that the opportunity granted to tribes to resurface in Libyan political life will continue to be an instrument of social manipulation and control to be pursued through these tribally based channels.

Role for regular armed forces

Since the beginning of the protests which escalated into a full-scale revolution, a divergence of opinions has been voiced in respect of the likely role to be played by the Libyan armed forces. Will it remain an emasculated army which the Libyan leader had humiliated for its failures in military campaigns in other African countries, in spite of its loyalty to Gaddafi's regime? In other words, will the armed forces remain loyal to the leader of the revolution, and at the same time preserve its unity? Further, the question about Libya's future as one united country, notwithstanding the presence of the tribal dimensions to the military establishment, begs an answer.

Even if the current regime maintains its control over only the capital Tripoli, the likely features of the future scenario are not easy to decipher, and the outcome will ultimately depend on the military-tribal balance of power. In fact, the split which can be discerned within the ranks of the armed forces that are still loyal to the regime, and amid the quasi-military and the security apparatuses, has come to the surface as a result of members of the army and other law-enforcement personnel refusing violently to clamp down on demonstrators or to kill their fellow citizens. Similarly, the withdrawal from the alliance by the Warfalla tribe, together with the resignation by hundreds, and possibly thousands, of soldiers from military service, or even their decision to join the popular revolution, are all telling signs that a large part of the army has dissociated itself from the regime.

At the same time, there are elements within the inner circles of the regime and its primary supporters who have likewise abandoned it, as happened with Ahmad Gaddaf al-Dam, who is related to Gaddafi through direct blood ties; or Abdel-Fattah Younis, the interior minister; or Sulaiman Mahmud, the supreme commander for the Tobruk region (which is located in the east of the country); in addition to a number of prominent officers (including those at the rank of colonel and brigadier), who had been in the service of the regime up to the beginning of the violent repression of the revolt. The result is that forces loyal to the regime are weak, and no one is left with Gaddafi except unrelenting loyalists, his family, clan and allies. Notwithstanding the regime's attempts to depict the demonstrators as terrorists, the movement which is defiantly opposing the government seemed, for a while, forcefully to be heading for the capital Tripoli. At the same time, it

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appears from the reshaping of the political administration in the east of the country, and the establishment, in Benghazi, of the National Libyan Council which is meant to be the 'mirror of the revolution', that the rebels possess a degree of political maturity. The main short-term danger remains the possibility of a series of massacres, whereas the preferable option is a negotiated settlement.

Despite the current state of civil war, it seems unlikely that matters will reach a state of anarchy resembling Somalia, even in the presence of the danger of a proliferation of weapons inside the country. In spite of Gaddafi's comments, there are no indications pointing to an eruption of widespread civil chaos and a split within the national borders of Libya. The best result would be the eventual emergence of a more balanced system between the three main regions in Libya, and a fairer distribution of wealth. A federal state might represent the hoped-for solution in this regard. It is a solution that had been attempted in the past, during the days of the Sanusi Kingdom of Libya.

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