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No. 194/2013 dated 14 October 2013

The abduction of Libya's Prime Minister: Militias Run Rampant

By Ahmed Salah Hashim

Synopsis

On 10 October, 2013, Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan was briefly abducted by one of Libya's numerous militia groups but was released unharmed hours later. His abduction may have more to do with the peculiar dynamics of post-revolutionary politics in Libya.

Commentary

THE BRIEF abduction of Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan on 10 October 2013 by one of the numerous militia groups in the conflict-ridden country highlights the extensive reach of these groups and the limited influence of the government in post-revolution Libya.

When Zeidan took office in 2012 he declared that disbanding the plethora of militias and the building of professional army and police forces was his highest priority. He viewed the existence of militias and the lack of professional military and security forces as dire threats to the stability and integrity of Libya.

Militias at large

He was particularly incensed by the upsurge in militia violence against ordinary citizens as well as between militias in 2013. Militias took the law into their hands killing people and torturing others. Last summer militiamen from Cyrenaica in eastern Libya closed down Libya's oil export terminals leading to the temporary cessation of oil exports while two tribes fought their own civil war some 40 km from the international airport at Tripoli.

There are some 150 militias comprising 150,000 men and women, some very small neighbourhood defence groups, others huge and heavily armed with looted weapons from Libya's vast arms depots. Some are allied to the government and others have tense relations with it. While some seek federalism for various regions of Libya others are ethnically-based like those of the Berber and the blacks in the south who want autonomy. The militias can be classified into relatively distinct groups.

The group that held Zeidan, the Operations Room of Libya's Revolutionaries, is affiliated to the Libya Shields, a coalition of militias from coastal cities west and east of Tripoli, mainly Zawya and Misrata. The Misratan element within the Shields is the strongest, having its own tanks and armoured personnel carriers. Their leaders oppose the growing dominance of Arab Bedoui tribes led by the Zintans in the security forces.

The Supreme Security Committee, which holds sway in eastern Tripoli acts as de facto police force. It is in alliance with the Shields against tribal Zintan militias, who are among the most powerful and are made up of Bedouin Arab tribal militias from the desert garrison town of Zintan, 140 kms southwest of Tripoli, and are entrenched in western Tripoli. Their commanders lead the Qaqaa militia, an 18,000-strong force that has incorporated members of Gaddafi's special forces. The Qaqaa oppose the growing influence of Misrata and the Shields in the post-revolution order. They have accused Islamists of dominating parliament and government.

The Jihadist-Salafist militias are mostly former fighters from the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group from Dema and Benghazi. Their aim is to work with Al Qaeda to establish an Islamic state in Libya. The hard-line Islamist faction Ansar al Sharia was blamed for the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi.

The militias which make up the Cyrenaica Federalists seek autonomy for the eastern region of Cyrenaica with Benghazi as its heart. Benghazi, which was the birthplace of the uprising against Gaddafi, has demanded more of the post-revolution spoils.

Zeidan's quest to curb and ultimately do away with the militias was a threat to their self-preservation and to certain vested interests – individuals, departments, some ministries – that are linked with and derive their power from access to various unofficial armed groups. Zeidan's strong interest in seeing NATO commence a training mission to reconstruct the Libyan armed forces was not perceived kindly by many of the militias and their commanders and other groups within the government.

It was unsurprising that a Ministry of Interior-sponsored militia undertook the abduction of the prime minister. It was a message to Zeidan. However the message fell on deaf ears for as soon as he was released Zeidan resumed railing against them and accused the militias of a coup attempt.

Libya's dysfunctional state

Libya is dysfunctional because it lacks strong state institutions. Post-revolutionary states usually go through a period of turmoil affecting their capacity to conduct business; but eventually the new state emerges with more effective capabilities than before. Libya's enormous oil wealth should have facilitated the government's ability to 'lubricate' the return to normalcy by building new and legitimate institutions. That this has not happened is due to three key structural factors.

The first has a great deal to do with the leadership pathology of Gaddafi, the former ruler. He 'gutted' the state institutions during four decades of misrule. Gaddafi either abolished or reduced institutions into hollow shells. Such was the fate of Libya's professional military establishment and security forces. Gaddafi steadily reduced the military's professionalism by putting men he trusted – usually relatives or members of allied tribes - in command. He lavished attention on specific 'special units' commanded again by blood relatives and which were tasked with protecting him and his regime.

Second, the revolution against Gaddafi was undertaken by a vast group of armed men including deserters from the military, Islamists, and ordinary people who took up arms because they were outraged by the depredations of the regime and its manifest brutality during the course of the fighting. These armed groups fought with dedication and bravery but not with much skill during the revolution; it took outside intervention by foreign air forces to turn the tide against Gaddafi. But following Gaddafi's downfall a myth was born that the armed groups, now self-styled battalions (kataib) or militias, were the heroes of the revolution. This gave them legitimacy.

Predatory militias

Third, the flip side of militia power is the lack of a credible post-revolutionary Libyan state power: national security council, intelligence services, professional military establishment, and police. Initially, in the absence of official security forces, the country's initial post-revolutionary government pursued contradictory policies.

It knew that militias could destabilise the state, and accordingly it enacted some programmes to disarm and demobilise them. Individual members of militias were to be reintegrated into an embryonic army. But these programmes were half-hearted, poorly-thought out and unprofessionally implemented.

Simultaneously, though, the new transitional government had to harness the militias' power and "rent" them as if they were a part of a national security infrastructure in order to project its own authority. Officials used militias to quell tribal fighting in the western Nafusa Mountains and the Saharan towns of Kufra and Sabha. During the elections, the state employed militias to provide security. The Ministry of Defence subcontracted border control and the defence of the country's oil installations and fields to militias.

The first post-revolutionary government unintentionally reinforced the power and "legitimacy" of forces that were

not under state control. These predatory militias became political stakeholders within a system whose debility allows them to survive and thrive. This made it difficult for the succeeding administrations to enforce state legitimacy or even build an official military establishment. The saga of Libya's militias is far from over.

Ahmed Salah Hashim is Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.