

## Middle East Report by Omar Ali al Montasser

### New crisis on Libyan horizon

*Qaddafi wants to unleash armed "popular committees" to dismantle his regular army, but that may not be so easy.*

**S**ometime during next summer, Libya will enter a decisive phase of its so-called Revolution, whenever Qaddafi decides to unleash his "popular militias" against the Libyan regular armed forces. This is one of the results of the yearly People's Congress, held this year—significantly—in the desert military base of Sebha, and not in the national capital of Tripoli.

Obviously not announcing it as a political purge, which it is, Qaddafi boasted in his opening speech that those "who have held weapons for 17 years need a rest, and the people have to take up arms."

No doubt, Qaddafi considers it yet another step of the kind he had unleashed some 10 years ago when Libya became a "Jamariyyah" (people's state). However, it will plunge Libya into one of its worst crises.

In the days following the American raids last April, garrison after garrison rebelled; they were massacred by the Syrian Air Force. Begun with the November 1985 execution of Colonel Hassan Skhal, a process of elimination of the top military leadership has been accelerated in recent months, even against the members of Qaddafi's Revolutionary Council.

Chief of Staff Abu Bakr Younis was demoted, General Inspector Mustafa Kharroubi is under house arrest, reportedly sick; military intelligence chief Khawaldi al Hamaidi has been sent for an extended mission to North Yemen, and has not come back.

Even Colonel Ar-Rifi, commander in chief of the Libyan armies in

Chad, seems to have disappeared. On March 2, six high ranking officers defected to Egypt as they were about to be arrested. In early January, Qaddafi organized a massive manhunt in Northern Chad when some 20 officers tried to defect.

This occurred in the context of a new military offensive to drive back the Libyans from the region by Chadian government forces, backed up by increased military deployments and supplies from France. More than 70 Libyan soldiers died in fighting around the military base of Faya Largeau between March 3 and 7.

However, to go from purges at the top leadership to an actual dismantling of his army, Qaddafi will need more than just popular support. He actually needs full military support from the Syrian Air Force, which maintains units throughout the country, and saved him last year, as well as full political support from his East bloc allies. In sum, he needs a firm commitment from his allies that they want to consolidate his regime.

The triumphal return to Tripoli on Feb. 28 of Major Abdel Salam Jalloud after close to six months of self-imposed exile in Damascus, seems to have represented such a commitment. During his Damascus sojourn, Jalloud had plenty of time to negotiate with the Syrians as well as the Soviets.

Intelligence reports indicate that Jalloud returned to Tripoli on his own terms: a total change of government, and a growing political role for the "Popular Committees" which repre-

sent his traditional base.

On both counts, his demands were met. He could give Qaddafi the green light for the anti-army operation, which has been kept at the level of mere purges so far. Nonetheless it is a major undertaking that the Libyan regime may not be able to carry through without provoking much strife within the country. At the same time, it indicates that Qaddafi is yet set on another major ideological mental trip.

In the same opening speech, he reaffirmed his solidarity with both Syria and Iran, and underlined that Tripoli would only be satisfied with an Islamic government in Chad.

Though Moscow always maintains a deliberate ambiguity in its relations with Tripoli, as a way of differentiating them from those with Damascus, it has enough confidence in the Libyan regime to use it to play several cards. Tripoli has become the center of Palestinian negotiations aimed at bringing about a new Palestinian National Council in coming months.

Such a reconciliation is essential to Gorbachov's ability to play his new Middle East "peace" card, making it clear that only Moscow can deliver the Palestinians. It is similarly sponsoring an attempted reconciliation between Tripoli and Baghdad, a diplomatic initiative coherent with Moscow's newly established mediating role between Baghdad and Teheran.

In related developments, French sources underline the closer relations between Tripoli and Sudan. The Sudanese have again asked Moscow to mediate in the rebellion in the Sudanese south.

Both France and Chad accuse the Sudanese government of having allowed some 1,500 Libyan troops to use the Sudanese Darfour province to prepare a new offensive in the eastern part of Chad.