

Africa Report by Thierry Lalevée

Chad victory: regional shifts ahead

After the fall of Wadi Doum, Qaddafi can no longer dictate to Tunisia and Algeria, and could even be threatened in Tripoli.

The takeover on March 22 of the Libyan military air base of Wadi Doum in northern Chad by the governmental forces of President Hissein Habré, has not only rung the death knell for Qaddafi's dreams of a "Sahelian Islamic Caliphate," but is calling into question his own future as Libya's leader.

The victory followed nearly three months of continuous military operations. In January, the city of Fada, north of the 16th parallel, was taken back from the Libyans, who had held that southernmost garrison since 1983. In the battle of Fada, hundreds of Libyans were killed or captured. In the ensuing weeks, while Habré consolidated his position there, other Chadian units were redeployed to the north of Chad in the Tibesti mountains, and others slowly moved forward in the Central Desert toward Wadi Doum.

Wadi Doum was artificially built by early 1984 by East German technicians, as an air base with a 3,750-meter runway accommodating the Antonov transport plane and allowing Libyan bombers to cross the 16th parallel. In February 1986, French jet fighters destroyed the runway as well as its anti-aircraft batteries. It was rebuilt by the East Germans in October. When Habré's forces took over Wadi Doum on March 22, only the pilots of Soviet MiG and Sukhoi fighters had time to flee, leaving behind some 11 Marchetti bombers, a couple of Antonovs, a few helicopters, and numbers of missiles and Soviet-made T-55 tanks. In the battles leading to that victory, more than 1,500 Libyans were killed and as many taken prisoner.

Libya's most important base of Faya Largeau is expected to fall next. As early as March 24, columns of Libyan soldiers withdrawing toward the Tibesti were spotted. Tripoli's decision to order 2,000 troops stationed in the Darfur western province of the Sudan to cross into northern Chad to come to the rescue, led nowhere. More of these units decided to cross back into Libya, rather than confronting the Chadians. With the fall of Faya Largeau, Libya will be back to its 1983 position of occupying only the Aouzou strip in northern Chad, across the Tibesti mountains.

What led to such rapid military changes was the step-up in American and French military support to the government of Hissein Habré, since Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger visited Paris last November. Though the Chadian government has always been denied an appropriate air-cover and its own air force, its army has been widely equipped with ground-to-air anti-aircraft missiles, as well as the Franco-German "Milan" anti-tank missiles which reduced to rubble the Soviet T-55 tank.

Qaddafi's own follies played a significant role too. In the last six months, the military command of the Libyan forces in Chad changed at least three times. Many are still wondering about the whereabouts of Colonel Ar-Riffi, who was stationed there for more than three years. The changes stemmed as much from Qaddafi's desire to crack down on the army as the only institution able to oppose and replace him, as from blaming local military com-

manders for his stupid orders. With no effective military leadership, the Libyan army has been more and more turned into a stew of regular soldiers, mercenaries from the "Islamic Legion," and thousands of Chadian immigrant workers who were impressed in Libyan factories and sent to the front, without any training—nor the will to fight. For Qaddafi, who had tried to hide his occupation of northern Chad under the thin cover of an "internal Chadian conflict," the defeat suffered by his "Libyan" army has wide-ranging impact—not the least being a slap at his racial beliefs that Libyan Arabs were superior to Black Africans.

No one can yet predict how this will affect things inside Libya. Observers do not rule out that Qaddafi may yet find a scapegoat, and another trick. However, he is very alone. On March 23, as the debacle of the Libyan army went into full swing, Qaddafi appealed to Moscow, announcing his readiness to join the Warsaw Pact and let the Soviets station nuclear missiles on his territory. On March 25, this was ridiculed by Soviet government spokesman Boris Pyadyshev, who said that such a "proposal has never been considered."

Moscow may use the occasion to send Qaddafi to another long period of meditation in the desert while Abdul-salam Jalloud takes actual control of the country.

There is no reason for the Algerians to continue rapprochement with a weak Libya. Even the Tunisians, who had fallen under political and economic blackmail by Tripoli, are expected to revise their policies of reconciliation. One opportunity afforded by the situation would be for the Libyan opposition to finish what the Chadian government has begun, by overthrowing the regime.