

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Early Signs of a Libyan Civil War?

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The Associated Press [reports](#) that forces opposed to Libya's governing National Transitional Council seized the city of Bani Walid after an eight-hour gun battle on Monday. Bani Walid was one of the last cities to fall to rebel troops in late 2011, and NTC civilian and military officials quickly blamed the new attack on loyalists of ousted dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

Perhaps, but such a facile explanation is reminiscent of the tendency of U.S. officials in Iraq during the initial years of the occupation to describe every attack on Western forces or Iraqi government personnel as the last gasp of Saddam "[dead enders.](#)" [The reality proved much different.](#) The early incidents in 2004-2005 were the harbinger of a much larger revolt against both the new regime and Western occupation forces. That conflict reflected, at least in part, the deep divisions between Sunni and Shia factions that still plague Iraq.

There is a possibility that the flare-up of violence in Libya could also be a symptom of profound divisions. Libya is less a cohesive nation-state than an amalgam of competing tribes, with a marked division along a north-south line running roughly through the middle of the country. Western tribes formed the core of support for Gadhafi's regime over the decades, while periodic rebellions against his rule originated among eastern tribes centered around the city of Benghazi. That same pattern held with respect to the 2011 uprising that—with considerable help from NATO—finally toppled Gadhafi.

U.S. and European officials have prodded the NTC to be more “inclusive” by broadening the body and reaching out to leaders of the western tribes. By and large, though, Libya's new rulers have ignored that advice, and there were already signs of growing discontent in western portions of the country. The AP story reported an anonymous comment from an official in Britain's Foreign Office disputing the official account coming out of Tripoli that the fight in Bani Walid was between government forces and “pro-Gadhafi loyalists.” The real nature of the conflict, according to the British diplomat, was a culmination of growing tensions between the NTC and “local tribal leaders.”

The fire-fight in Bani Walid does not necessarily herald the onset of a civil war in Libya, but one certainly cannot rule out that possibility. If an internecine conflict does erupt, the United States and its NATO allies should adopt a posture of neutrality. NATO has already meddled far too much on behalf of the NTC and the eastern tribes that dominate it. The wisdom of such meddling became especially questionable when one of the first acts of the NTC after seizing the national capital was to endorse the goal of imposing Sharia law. Given Libya's complex tribal composition and the dubious ideological orientation of the NTC, U.S. and NATO officials must guard against being conned by allegations coming from the regime that its adversaries are just stubborn Gadhafi loyalists. As we discovered in Iraq, such a simplistic, self-serving explanation can conceal a much more troubling reality.

The United States has nothing at stake in Libya that warrants involvement in that country's internal disputes, and Washington erred by participating in NATO's original intervention. If the current tensions escalate into a full-blown conflict between Libya's eastern and western tribes, the Obama administration should not repeat that error.