

LIBYA: FRENCH RECOGNITION OF THE LIBYAN REBELS IS A GAMBLE

By Claude MONIQUET

We don't know if French President Nicolas Sarkozy is a poker player but he obviously gambled today. By the end of the morning, **France has become the first country to recognise the National Libyan Council (NLC) of Benghazi as the only legitimate government of the country.**

This decision was **unilaterally announced, apparently without any prior contact with France's European partners.** It comes a day after the European Parliament urged the E.U. to recognise the rebels as both **NATO** and the **European Union** have important meetings today and tomorrow in Brussels to discuss the situation and try to find a common ground on the crisis. Those meetings will culminate this Friday with a **summit of the European Chiefs of States and Prime Ministers.**

The French decision is a politically risky one:

- It comes as **Europe is divided** between those advocating a direct and rapid action (including France and the U.K.) and those who adopted a more cautious stance. The unilateral move of France could, thus, complicate the finding of a political consensus on the level of "interventionism" of the E.U. (and NATO)
- Traditionally, as most of the other powers in the modern world, **the European Union recognises states and not governments.** Diplomatic links could be cut with a state if it breaks international law and/or oppresses its people, but **the recognition of an opposition as being a "legitimate government" is unusual. It creates a dangerous precedent.**
- Breaking the diplomatic links with Colonel Gaddafi and opening new relations with the rebels is a **"no way out" policy.** It **deprives Paris of any possibility to discuss with Colonel Gaddafi's regime and try to exercise an influence on it.**
- **Nobody knows what the Benghazi-based NLC really is and what forces it exactly covers.** The only well-known face is **Mr Mustapha Abdeljalil, who was the Justice Minister for Colonel Gaddafi.** Despite

the fact some human right organisations had a positive view of its “strong stances against arbitrary arrest”, **the man was a close associate of the dictator and can, therefore hardly be described as a democrat.** For the rest, the Council is probably backed by tribal leaders, Islamists and, probably, a few genuine democrats even if the last are obviously rare in Libya.

- Currently, the **council controls approximately a third of the Libyan territory.** The last couple of days it faced a fierce counter-attack of forces loyal to Gaddafi and **nobody could assume it will resist this counter-offensive.** The rebel forces just retreated from Ras-Lanuf, a very important position. This defeat could announce very difficult moments for the rebels. **If, at the end of the day Gaddafi wins, French interests and presence in Libya will be badly damaged and even destroyed.**
- The French decision **could push Colonel Gaddafi to try to “finish the job” as soon as possible and use any means to crush the opposition,** which could end in a bloodbath.
- On the other hand, **if the rebels win, there is absolutely no insurance that they will install democracy and stabilise the country.** More violence and chaos are to be feared.

For all those reasons, we assess the French decision was clearly premature.

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