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Is US Behind ‘Rogue’ General’s Libya Coup?

By Jason Ditz

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On May 14, the US Marines announced the deployment of 200 marines to Sicily, in southern Italy, as a “crisis response” force for Libya. They did so at the behest of the US State Department, who at the time insisted there was no specific threat, nor any imminent plan to evacuate the embassy in Tripoli.

Just four days later, General Khalifa Hifter and his self-proclaimed Libyan National Army attacked Tripoli, took over parliament, and announced his intention to “purge” the nation of Islamists, starting with the parliamentarians themselves.

It’s Gen. Hifter’s second attempted coup this year, and seems to be going quite a bit better than the February fiasco, which began with statements announcing his takeover, and never really expanded much beyond that. The timing of the marine deployment suggests this latest move did not come as a major surprise to the administration, but Hifter’s US connections may run much deeper.

Gen. Hifter got his start, and his generalship, as a close ally of Moammar Gadhafi, but changed sides when he was captured during the failed late 80’s invasion of Chad. Released at the behest of the US, after which he was set up as a military leader in the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), a rebel faction based out of Chad which was backed by the CIA.

The NFSL didn’t last much longer in Chad, however, as a takeover of Chad by Gadhafi ally Idriss Deby led the US to evacuate the rebels. Hifter quietly relocated to the DC suburbs after that, and lived there through 2011, when he left to declare himself a rebel leader during the fight that ousted Gadhafi.

His post-revolution career has been perplexing, as Gen. Hifter has hung around in Libya, and often claimed to be a leader, if not the leader, in the Libyan military, but never seems to have been formally appointed to any post of serious power.

Eventually, the general got his army, or at least his self-styled army, forming the Libyan National Army, which has no official connection to Libya’s actual army, but inexplicably has at times been able to muster attack helicopters and artillery in attacks on Islamist groups. The “army” has been fighting an on-again, off-again crusade against Islamist factions, with the government of former Prime Minister (and former NFSL leader) Ali Zeidan mostly looking the other way.

His attack on Benghazi on Friday seemed to change things considerably, and the new Libyan government was harshly critical of the operation, even sending the real military to the outskirts of the city to prevent either side from bringing more reinforcements to the battle.

Instead of being chastened by his lack of a government imprimatur, Hifter’s forces marched straight for Tripoli, and by Sunday had taken over the airport and parliament. General Hifter has since castigated parliament as a den of Islamists,

Whether the coup lasts remains to be seen, but he hit parliament just hours after Prime Minister Ahmed Malteeq finally formed the first post-Zeidan government, after two months of infighting over cabinet positions,

Though a self-described independent, Prime Minister Malteeq was openly backed by several Islamist parties in the battle for premiership, which no doubt played a role in Gen. Hifter’s objection to his government.

Gen. Hifter has bragged about his US backing in the past, though exactly where he stands with the US at present is as unclear as where he stands within Libya's military command. Anticipatory actions ahead of the coup, however, suggest that whatever prompted Hifter's attack, it was not a surprise in the US.