

Gaddafi stirs up Islamists against “Christian” forces

Country/Region: Libya

Under fire dictator Muammar Gaddafi is portraying Western military intervention in Libya as a religious crusade in a bid to get “all Islamic armies” to defend him against the “Christian” West.



Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi

As coalition forces step up pressure on the colonel with sustained air strikes, he is using increasingly religious rhetoric to denounce the action and harness support for his regime. Gaddafi said at the weekend that he was defending Libya’s land and dignity against America, France and Britain, “the Christians that are in a pact against us”. On state television he promised a “long-drawn war” and claimed, “We have Allah with us, you have the devil on your side.”

Then, on Tuesday night, in his first public appearance since the coalition began enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya, Gaddafi said there was a “new crusader battle launched by crusader countries on Islam” and issued this rallying cry to supporters:

Long live Islam everywhere. All Islamic armies must take part in the battle, all free [people] must take part in the battle.

Consequences for Christians

The comments raise alarm for Libya’s small and vulnerable Christian community, who may become revenge targets of Gaddafi supporters’ anti-Western wrath. Christians in Muslim countries are generally associated with the West, which puts them in heightened danger at a time of Western military intervention. This has been the case in Iraq since the 1990-1 Gulf War, where Christians have been targeted in violent attacks and, as a result, hundreds of thousands have fled the country.

The Church in Libya is composed almost entirely of expatriates, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa; many of them are likely to leave the country as the fighting intensifies. They have generally enjoyed the freedom to worship without harassment under Gaddafi, but evangelism among Muslims is strictly forbidden, and Libyan converts from Islam to Christianity are often vulnerable and isolated. Fear of government infiltrators discourages them from meeting together, and those who make contact with foreigners put themselves at further risk – a danger that will only be exacerbated in light of the hostility to foreign military intervention in Libya.

Invoking Islamists

Gaddafi’s comments seem intent on provoking an Islamist response to the Western intervention in Libya, both within the country and from outside. During his years in power the colonel has clamped down hard on militant Islamism, but he has now threatened to join forces with al-Qaeda. He said, “If they [the West] behave with us as they did in Iraq, then Libya will leave the international alliance against terrorism. We will then ally ourselves with al-Qaeda and declare a holy war.”

This danger comes at a time of growing Islamist influence in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, following the revolutions that ousted their respective dictators. Exiled Islamist leaders have returned to these countries to great popular acclaim, while Islamist parties are preparing to stand in forthcoming elections.

Gaddafi has long aspired to spread Islam throughout Africa, with dreams of a single Muslim government for the continent or a United Islamic States of Africa. And though the version of Islam exported by Libya has not been extreme, he now appears to be appealing to more radical elements in a bid to harness support against Western opposition to his regime.