Secret Meeting in Algiers

On December 4, 2014 Maghreb Confidential, a newspaper published in Paris and focusing on reviewing political and economic events in the North Africa, reported on a secret meeting in Algiers between two iconic Libyan leaders. These are Ali Sallabi, a theologian known for his clerical views, presently the spiritual father of the Al-Fajr Islamist coalition, and Mahmoud Jibril, the leader of so-called secular coalition, the National Forces Alliance, NFA. Judging by Mahmoud Jibril’s statements, NFA allegedly supports the new Libyan government in Tobruk.

The Algerian party is reported to have been the initiator of the meeting which had been arranged to facilitate a negotiated compromise between the leaders of various Libyan groups. Since September 2014, the Algerian authorities have been looking for opportunities to establish contacts between the former Gaddafi supporters and moderate Islamists. Noteworthy is the fact that in the early 2000’s Ali Sallabi and Mahmoud Jibril were putting lots of effort to have the Islamists included in the Libyan government. As we know, this process had been governed by Seim al-Islam, the son of Muammar Gaddafi.

The fact of meeting itself is interesting because Mahmoud Jibril, besides everything else, is one of the leaders of the Warfalla tribal group considered to be one of the largest and most influential tribal groups in Tripolitania. It stands high with Algeria who sees Warfalla tribe as a protective shield against the Islamists who established their base in Tripoli. The Warfalla still retain neutrality in the inter-Libyan armed confrontation. Western experts believe the outcome of this confrontation depends mainly on the position of the tribe’s leaders.

The meeting between the two leaders was preceded by a series of consultations between Mahmoud Jibril and Mustapha Nouh, the Islamist deputy intelligence chief. Seemingly, conditions of a possible compromise were discussed.

The possibility of Ali Sallabi’s trip to Algeria was most likely discussed by the Islamist leaders in Tripoli and the trip was probably authorized by their military leader, Abdelhakim Belhadj.

By conducting such consultations in its territory, Algeria is trying to seize the initiative from Egypt to resolve the crisis in Libya. Apparently, Cairo is regarding the meeting in Algeria as an attempt to neutralize their protégé - a retired Libyan General, Khalifa Haftar, leading, according to the Syrian information agency SANA, the operations of Al-Karama in elimination of terrorists in Libya. The Egyptians, as a retaliatory move, are ready to release Ahmed Kaddafedam, the leader of Gaddafi-supporters, to have him conduct negotiations with moderate Islamists under the control of Egyptian party.

On December 7, 2014 newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, with reference to an unnamed member of the Government of Abdullah Al-Thani, spread the message that the Libyan government located in Tobruk intends to appoint General Khalifa Haftar commander in chief of the armed forces of the country. Concurrently, there were reports on the latest successes of Abdullah Al-Thani’s supporters in the fight against the Islamists near Tripoli and in the east of the country. Apparently, these steps are Cairo’s response to the meeting in Algiers. Simultaneously, this should be regarded as a signal to all major tribal groups currently maintaining neutrality, including the Warfalla, that it is time
to determine which side to take.

Bakhtiar Usmonov, political scientist and PhD in political science, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.