Toward the Endgame in Libya

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Brief Analysis

The conflict in Libya is now dominated by deliberate offensive warfare conducted by the rebels and NATO, and both Muammar Qadhafi and his regime will likely be gone by the end of this phase. The confrontation has been, and will continue to be, a very dramatic event: a once-powerful and entrenched regime pitted against its people and now in its last throes. The conflict has also been instructive in many ways, serving as one model for the processes unleashed by the Arab Spring and teaching us about the resilience of regimes, the power of an angry people, and the challenges and limits of external military intervention.

The war is not over, though, and a favorable outcome is not assured. The rebels are rapidly gaining diplomatic recognition and financial assistance, but they still need military aid. For his part, Qadhafi shows no signs of ending the war except on his terms and is likely hoping for a diplomatic miracle to save his regime. The international community should avoid feeding that hope at all costs, rejecting any ceasefires or diplomatic solutions that do not include Qadhafi's immediate and unconditional exit from the country, along with those who have sustained him.

An Evolving Conflict

The war has passed through multiple stages since it began four months ago and has never been static or a stalemate, despite such descriptions by the press and those pushing for a ceasefire. It has always been dynamic and evolving, sometimes in the regime's favor, but now increasingly in favor of the rebels. The conflict is now in a stage of deliberate warfare in which rebel forces and NATO airpower are wearing down regime combat and support capabilities, expanding rebel areas of control in the west, and sapping the cohesion of regime forces, members, and supporters.

Why Is Qadhafi Still Standing?

Without question, the regime has fought back hard and generally well from a tactical and operational standpoint. This success has been based on a combination of factors, including the regime's military superiority over the rebels, especially early in the war; its resilience and ability to remain internally cohesive; and its skillful, energetic, and creative application of military resources.

One militarily questionable aspect of the regime's operations has been its strategy of contesting control everywhere. From the beginning, Qadhafi sought to hold onto all parts of the country at once and retake every area lost. This

approach dissipated the regime's efforts and contributed to its failure to notch decisive victories.

Currently, several critical processes are shaping the war in favor of the rebels. Attrition is slowly taking a toll on both sides but appears to be affecting Qadhafi's forces more than it has the rebels. While the regime is losing heavy combat systems and trained personnel, the rebels are losing "butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers," so to speak. Replacing a nonprofessional rebel militiaman is much easier than replacing a T-72 tank driver or commander. The regime is also suffering reduced capacity to command, supply, and deploy forces, and its ability to mount serious offensives is steadily diminishing. Although the pace of attrition gives the regime some time to adjust, the rebels and NATO are stretching this capacity and inflicting cumulative losses.

The ebb and flow of cohesion is another key process. Regime forces have largely held together, but cohesion increasingly appears to be eroding. For their part, rebel forces have been cohesive when on the defensive but less so when on the offensive. This trend appears to be changing, however, at least in western Libya.

Adaptation is perhaps the single most important process at work. All participants, including NATO, are learning how to fight this war. Regime forces have adapted to NATO command of the air and continued to operate. And rebel forces have shifted from reckless to deliberate advances, employing significant firepower while exploiting NATO air operations to attack weakened regime elements.

Potential Outcomes

The war will likely end in one of four ways:

- Regimes forces slowly weaken and dissolve, leading to a rebel military victory, perhaps with Qadhafi leaving by agreement or fleeing wherever he can. This appears to be the conflict's current path.
- Sudden regime collapse stemming from loss of will to continue or total breakdown of political and military cohesion. This could come at any time and spur Qadhafi's departure.
- Stalemate until a ceasefire is achieved. This would give Qadhafi political, diplomatic, and military breathing room. He would then attempt to consolidate the ceasefire into a long-term arrangement that leaves him in power over at least part of Libya -- an outcome that the international community should take pains to avoid.
- Regime comeback, which is unlikely to happen unless NATO quits or the rebels disintegrate into political and military chaos. This would sow the seeds for future crises and internal bloodletting.

If the best and most likely outcome is a rebel victory, NATO should expedite it in the following ways:

- Apply airpower more vigorously -- more planes, more strikes, more intense operations, and more coordination with the rebels.
- Arm the rebels with antitank weapons and mortars, as well as command-and-control, intelligence, and medical support.
- Train the rebels -- expand efforts already underway and teach them how to fight and use their forces more effectively.
- Give the rebels the economic resources they need. Their finances are improving, but NATO could greatly accelerate the process.
- Recognize the rebels sooner rather than later. Every state that recognizes the opposition's recently formed Transitional National Council puts another nail in the regime's coffin.

Implications

A people in arms is not invincible. Qadhafi's buffoonery masked the determination and power of an entrenched autocracy, showing how regimes that remain cohesive internally and retain the loyalty of their security forces are

formidable opponents. Without external military intervention, the rebellion would likely have failed -- a sobering lesson in light of current events in Syria, it should be mentioned.

The Libyan saga also demonstrates that limited, low-risk intervention does not guarantee an early conclusion. In fact, an incremental, limited response can give the enemy time for adaptation. The threat or use of major force in such situations may not be desirable, but it could prove necessary to save lives and achieve political change. In Libya, a robust U.S./NATO response early on would likely have ended the conflict well before now.

There are always good reasons not to act: uncertainty, other commitments, the inherent risks of casualties, mission creep, and escalation. But inaction and delay are not cost-free -- in human terms, it is the Libyan people who are paying the price for NATO's hesitation.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. ❖

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