

Libya: The Battle for the West

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Brief Analysis

The regime of Muammar Qadhafi is engaging in multiple fights across Libya, but the focal point is now in the west. The battle itself has two main fronts: the city and port of Misratah and the Nafusa Mountains to the south and west of Tripoli. The regime is fighting hard in both areas. If it fails, the war will come to the doorstep of the capital.

Throughout western Libya, NATO's Operation Unified Protector is playing a major role. It has saved Misratah and likely prevented Qadhafi loyalists from overrunning several mountain towns stubbornly held by the rebels. Yet even as the campaign inflicts slow damage on the regime's military, it has not yet done enough to cause the collapse of Qadhafi's forces or to unravel their internal cohesion. Defeat may indeed come to the loyalists in the long term, but as long as the government survives it can hope for a change and the Libyan people will continue to suffer.

The Misratah Front

The battle for Misratah, Libya's third largest city, has become the war's most important. The city's size, coastal location some 115 miles from Tripoli, and symbolic status for the opposition in the west have invested it with critical significance for the regime and the rebels alike.

After attacking the city for weeks, the regime appeared ready to overtake it in mid-April. Yet a combination of NATO airpower and sustained resistance by rebel forces -- whose members are gradually gaining the benefits of combat experience -- along with better arms and reinforcement from the east ultimately pushed regime units back to the city's outskirts. The regime has responded to these setbacks by seeking to isolate the port with artillery fire and a partially successful attempt at naval mining. Meanwhile, it continues to strike the city with rocket and artillery fire while launching probes by ground forces. For their part, the rebels have taken the offensive, fighting to push regime loyalists beyond rocket range of the city and to take the Misratah air field, which has served as the regime's main base of operations in the area.

The Nafusa Mountain Front

Since the revolt began on February 17, the regime has sought -- with only limited success -- to subdue unrest in the Nafusa Mountains region. The rebel-held area represents a threat to the government's base around Tripoli and a potential obstacle to communications with southern Libya, while a restive Berber population poses a particular

challenge to the regime.

In their quest to control the mountains, Qadhafi loyalists are employing two or more combined arms task forces, each consisting of some seventy to eighty armored vehicles, truck-mounted anti-aircraft weapons, and rocket launchers. Yet the rebels have shown resolve, organizing under the name "United Forces of the Mountains" and moving from town to town to help fend off threats from the regime. These rebel forces have turned back repeated assaults on Nalut, Zintan, and Yafran.

On the border separating Wazzin, Libya, from Dahibah, Tunisia, there has been a seesaw battle between rebel and loyalist forces, with the loyalists making several shallow incursions into Tunisia. For the rebels, control of the border post is essential for maintaining a supply line into the mountains, while refugees trying to escape the fighting use the post to escape to Tunisia. For the regime, a victory in the border contest would symbolize an ability to exercise sovereignty and control over its territory.

NATO Air and Naval Operations

NATO strike operations have proven to be the great equalizer in the conflict. They saved Misratah from being retaken by the regime and are assisting the rebels in their efforts in the Nafusa Mountains.

NATO strike operations consist primarily of battlefield interdiction, strikes approximating close air support, counter-logistics missions, and counter-command-and-control sorties. According to NATO data, most of the strike effort is focused on western Libya, primarily around Tripoli, Misratah, Sirte, and Zintan. NATO officials assert that the strikes are reducing the regime's ability to employ, command, and sustain its combat forces. As of April 29, NATO claimed to have hit some 600 targets, damaging or destroying approximately 220 armored vehicles and 200 ammunition facilities. The effort, however, is dispersed, with NATO averaging only about sixty strike sorties a day, distributed across command and control, logistics, and forces targets, and in both the western and eastern theaters. While the present level of effort (at least) should ultimately break the regime forces, that process could be protracted, lasting weeks if not months.

In its naval operations, NATO is contributing effectively to the rebel war effort by keeping the port of Misratah open, which allows the rebels to move reinforcements, both men and weapons, to Misratah from the east and to evacuate wounded and nonessential personnel. The April 29 attempt by the regime to mine the port shows how seriously it takes rebel access.

The Evolving Conflict

For several reasons the war is not a stalemate. Attrition is at work, with the loss of men and material likely favoring the rebels. Continuing regime casualties, both to airstrikes and rebel actions, include key combat systems such as tanks, other armored fighting vehicles, and rocket launchers, along with trained military personnel. By contrast, losses to the rebels' equipment appear limited and their manpower deficits seem to be made up without too much difficulty.

Regime forces have proven adaptive. Even with NATO's complete control of the air, pro-Qadhafi forces have used infantry supported by tanks in the close fighting in Misratah; employed artillery in cities and towns, essentially providing an answer to NATO airpower; and created mobile combined arms task forces for operations in the countryside.

The rebels too have adapted. In Misratah, they have shown some skill in urban fighting, employing makeshift barriers and "tank-hunter" teams. In addition, their weapons have improved, with vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars appearing on the scene. Likely sources of such arms include battlefield recovery from enemy forces and captured regime stockpiles. Moreover, the rebels have developed the means to resupply and

reinforce Misratah from the east and -- as described before -- the ability to organize and coordinate resistance in the Nafusa Mountains. These adaptations have helped substantially to frustrate regime operations in the west.

NATO operations have evolved as well, including in adjustments to maneuvers by regime forces. Shifts include a focus on finding and hitting key weapons systems, initiating attacks on command and control and logistics sites, and employing drones.

In the east, the war is not over, but major activity has ceased in the vicinity of Marsa al-Burayqah and Ajdabiya. This absence of fighting has allowed the rebels to reorganize and train units and send reinforcements to Misratah, while continuing to pin down some portion of the regime forces. Seeking an opening, the regime has begun operating in the oases south of Ajdabiya. It has retaken Kufra Oasis, probably using it as an operational base from which forces can advance north toward Ajdabiya. Yet NATO control of the air makes it unlikely that the loyalists can achieve significant results through this repositioning.

Conclusion

The regime's commitment to contest control of all of Libya puts it at risk of losing everything. With resources overstretched, the regime has seldom been able to concentrate enough forces to decisively defeat the rebels. At the same time, the loyalists have not ceded any areas to the rebels of late. Whatever the scenario today, Tripoli's strategy would have worked had it not been for the intervention of NATO.

NATO has apparently committed to employing limited force in a lengthy conflict. As suggested earlier, even a protracted war will likely end in the regime's defeat, assuming NATO continues operations at least at current levels. But the cost to the Libyan people will be significant, in both casualties and damage, along with increasingly daunting prospects for a postwar economic recovery and enduring political strife. The rebels must improve their offensive and defensive capabilities alike, and NATO must maintain pressure at least at current levels. A greater commitment of NATO resources to the battle and to assist the rebels, as well as a greater willingness to take risks in using them, could shorten the war and reduce its price tag.

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

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