

The Grinding War in Libya Favors Qadhafi

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Brief Analysis

Despite appearances, the current state of the Libyan civil war is not a stalemate. Muammar Qadhafi's forces have adapted somewhat to NATO's control of the air and have continued offensive operations. And although rebel forces in the east are slowly improving their organizational, communications, and combat capabilities, they are far from being able to gain and hold ground against even depleted regime forces. NATO operations have been sufficient to prevent the opposition's defeat, degrading Qadhafi's ability to command and sustain his forces or employ heavy weapons against rebels and civilians. But allied forces have not broken the regime's willingness or ability to continue the fight, and NATO is reluctant to take the military steps needed to turn the tide rapidly.

Both the rebels and NATO will suffer a major setback if the western stronghold of Misratah succumbs to regime attacks. Yet, unless the West acts with more determination and assumes more operational risk, the city will likely fall, perhaps soon.

Two-Front War

Two clear theaters of war have emerged in Libya: an eastern front that has essentially stabilized near Ajdabiya, and a western theater with several compartments. In the east, the pattern of advance and retreat by both sides has now settled into indecisive skirmishing around Ajdabiya, with neither side able to obtain a clear advantage. Regime units are at the end of a long supply line, NATO continues to strike at their heavy weapons and logistical support, and their resort to light forces, while complicating NATO targeting, has not enabled them to advance further against solidifying resistance backed by critical NATO support. For their part, rebel forces still lack the ability to plan and conduct serious offensives and are hard pressed to hold the ground they have gained, even with foreign assistance.

In the west, the regime has not registered any outright successes in recent weeks; its last major victory in the area was the March 11 fall of Zawiyah. Accordingly, the battle for Misratah is particularly important in military, psychological, and political terms.

The fighting in Misratah has become more desperate since the conflict began. The regime is using indiscriminate artillery fire, cluster munitions, heavy armor, and snipers in the city to isolate and grind down the opposition. Rebels there are only lightly armed and, while exploiting the advantages of urban defense, are suffering from continued attrition and mounting fatigue. Opposition forces in the east have reportedly attempted to send men and arms to

Misratah, but any such efforts have not noticeably changed the situation. Although the rebels have shown remarkable fortitude, their staying power under these conditions is in doubt.

Meanwhile, the towns of Nalut, Zintan, Qalaa, and Yafran in the Nafusa Mountains southwest of Tripoli are still held by rebels and remain under regime attack. This area is populated by Berbers not loyal to the regime and has been in revolt since the beginning of the war.

In Tripoli itself, cautiously organized underground resistance has reportedly continued. This suggests the potential for open opposition to reemerge if the regime's hold seems to be slipping.

Driving Factors

Several important factors have brought the conflict to its current state. As mentioned previously, regime forces have adapted to NATO airpower, using artillery systems and mortars, light motorized forces, and heavy forces as appropriate to the terrain and situation. Artillery is used to attrite rebel forces in built-up areas, put them to flight wherever they lack protection, and terrorize their civilian supporters. Light forces, either as infantry or mounted on utility vehicles, are employed in urban or open areas to reduce exposure to air attack while still conducting offensives. And heavy forces such as tanks and armored fighting vehicles (AFVs) are employed in urban environments where NATO is less willing to risk collateral damage, or even in open areas if the regime believes it is worth the risk. This combination of forces and tactics has allowed Qadhafi to maintain pressure on rebel forces and reverse some of their successes despite NATO intervention.

Indeed, NATO airpower has not proved to be a magic wand sweeping the regime's forces from the field. Limited strike assets, lack of precise and timely information on mobile targets, low risk tolerance for collateral damage, and differing rules of engagement among contributing militaries have resulted in a less-than-decisive application of force.

Nevertheless, NATO efforts are having serious effects on the ground. Since April 11, when the alliance began providing daily operational reports, 512 strike sorties (40 percent of the overall effort) have been flown, and 33 bunkers, 39 ammunition storage targets, 48 tanks/AFVs, and 10 artillery systems have been hit. NATO data shows persistent targeting of command facilities, logistics facilities, and vehicles, and heavy weapons in the areas of Tripoli, Misratah, Sirte, Ajdabiya/Marsa al-Burayqah, and Zintan. The alliance also claims a steady and significant degradation in the government's ability to command and sustain its forces, though it admits that the regime shows no sign of quitting the conflict.

The nature of the rebel forces has contributed to the war's current state as well. They remain poorly organized, haphazardly supported, and indifferently commanded. They still lack the weapons and training to confront regime forces on anything approaching equal terms. On the positive side, they remain willing to fight (as demonstrated by the battles for Misratah and Ajdabiya), even if they are prone to confusion and flight when attacked in the open.

Although the situation in Misratah is dire, the rebels' prospects elsewhere could change more favorably over time. NATO has committed to maintain operations until the regime departs, and the ongoing strikes are having effects that will likely become greater over time. Rebel forces will likely continue to improve, while Qadhafi's forces will eventually become less effective due to attrition, loss of command and control, and degraded logistical capabilities. In addition, the rebels' diplomatic status is growing under de facto international recognition and increased financial assistance, while the regime's diplomatic situation has little to no chance of improving.

Implications

A number of issues crucial to the war's future course remain unresolved. For example, the staying power of regime forces has been surprising after nine weeks of fighting -- what do they have left in terms of manpower equipment

reserves, not to mention the physical and mental reserves of combat units?

Also in question is when, or if, the rebels will be able to generate and employ forces effectively enough to take and hold ground. They have shown some defensive capability, but their offensive operations have consistently failed amid chaotic scenes of flight and disorder. The trickle of foreign arms and equipment (including communications gear) as well as the presence of increasing numbers of French, British, and other advisors will improve rebel capabilities in the east, but this will likely be a slow process.

In the meantime, Misratah is poised to fall. Although such an outcome might not prove decisive for the overall war, it would be an enormous embarrassment for NATO, a serious setback for the rebels, a triumph for the regime, and a tragedy for the population. Yet it will likely happen unless NATO takes forceful action soon.

More broadly, the alliance's unwillingness to take risks and strike regime forces more vigorously could affect the entire conflict. What is lacking in the NATO mission is not capability, but the will to use it. NATO must prosecute the operation in a sufficiently determined fashion. War is largely about willpower, and Qadhafi currently holds the upper hand on this front.

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

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