

Goals for the London Conference on Libya

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

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On Tuesday, March 29, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will join counterparts from over thirty-five nations at a conference in London to discuss the ongoing crisis in Libya and establish a political "contact group" for future coordination. All countries contributing forces to the NATO-led military operations will be in attendance, as will NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon, and African Union chairman Jean Ping.

The conference comes at a pivotal point for Libya, the international coalition, and the United States. Libyan opposition fighters, just days after facing defeat in Benghazi, are advancing on Sirte and continuing their clash with regime forces in Misratah; success on these fronts would put them at Qadhafi's doorstep in Tripoli. The international coalition has just handed full control of its military operations to NATO after days of squabbling that pitted France, who preferred ad hoc international coordination over NATO operational control, against Britain and the United States. Meanwhile, President Obama, who has come under bipartisan criticism for his Libya decisionmaking, is keen to fulfill his pledge to relinquish America's leading role after "days, not weeks" of intervention.

Beyond further coordination of humanitarian efforts, the United States and its allies should seek to accomplish several important political goals at the London conference tomorrow:

- **Reaffirm broad international and regional support for Libya intervention.** For the Obama administration, which has touted its approach to Libya as a model of international intervention in civil conflicts, one of the most important outcomes of the conference will be the mere fact of it. To this end, robust regional participation -- from Africa, but particularly from the Middle East -- is vital.
- **Squaring military and political strategies.** President Obama has been criticized at home for espousing a political

objective -- the departure or removal of Col. Qadhafi -- that appears unconnected to the more modest objectives of the international military campaign. Furthermore, the political outcome advocated in UN Security Council Resolution 1973 -- dialogue between the regime and opposition -- falls short of what Washington has called for. To the extent that the conference provides backing for Obama's more ambitious political aim and lays out a path for achieving it -- such as new sanctions or possible exit deals for Qadhafi's inner circle -- it will be a success for the White House.

- **Defining the international status of the Libyan opposition.** While France officially recognized the opposition's government-in-waiting -- the Interim Transitional National Council -- early in the conflict, the United States and others have so far confined themselves to diplomatic contacts with the council's representatives. In connection with developing international consensus on a political strategy, the London conference should aim to develop uniformity among the attendees on ways to deal with and support the opposition government. Two possibilities bear consideration: first, that a two-state scenario will emerge should the opposition prove unable to topple Qadhafi in the near term and, second, that the opposition will soon be in full control of Libya and in need of considerable diplomatic, financial, and technical support to rebuild a state long neglected by Muammar Qadhafi.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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