

Beyond a No-Fly Zone: How to Protect Civilians in Libya

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Brief Analysis

Much has been achieved in the first few days of Operation Odyssey Dawn: in the east, the regime's advance on the opposition capital of Benghazi has been decisively checked, and conditions have been set for policing of a no-fly zone across Libya's coastal belt. But the zone is merely a means to an end, not the end itself. The next stage -- protecting civilians in western Libya -- entails far greater risks and challenges than the opening phase of operations.

What Resolution 1973 Demands

UN Security Council Resolution 1973 goes far beyond the tactical mechanisms of establishing a no-fly zone and an arms embargo. At its core is a demand for "immediate establishment of a cease-fire and a complete end to violence and all attacks against, and abuses of, civilians." The resolution authorizes member states "to take all necessary measures...to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack." It also notes the Arab League's March 12 call "to establish safe areas in places exposed to shelling as a precautionary measure that allows the protection of the Libyan people and foreign nationals."

So far, the nations involved in the operation have embraced the tactical mechanisms without clearly articulating how they will protect civilians in western Libya. The United States has prepared the way for a no-fly zone (though it appears eager to hand off most of the actual enforcement to its coalition allies), while NATO has expressed willingness to lead the enforcement of an arms embargo at sea and in the air. Yet even if both mechanisms function perfectly, the Qadhafi regime would still be able to use artillery, tanks, and other ground forces to liquidate pockets of resistance in the west. In fact, this exact outcome occurred in southern Iraq in the early 1990s, when Saddam Hussein's regime was embargoed and subject to a no-fly zone yet still managed to pummel southern Iraqi resistance, drain the marshes, and drive tens of thousands into exile in Iran.

Regime Modus Operandi

The regime's march on Benghazi may be over, but every day brings new evidence that its forces are conducting attacks on both the opposition-held city of Misratah (approximately 200 kilometers from Tripoli and 600 kilometers west of rebel front lines near Ajdabiya) and the 100-kilometer corridor between Nalut and Zintan,

stretching along the Nafusa Mountains southwest of Tripoli. Qadhafi has a formula for dealing with such centers of resistance, one that has proven successful in cities west of the capital such as Zawiyah, Zuwarah, and Gharyan. First, government forces surround and isolate the town in question, cutting off all services (electricity, water) as well as food and medicine deliveries. The regime then launches artillery and rocket strikes on populated areas and mounts multiple daily incursions by tank columns and light infantry forces. These raids typically involve indiscriminate firing on civilian homes along the column's route, along with occasional house-to-house searches for military-age males, who are removed to an unknown fate. Meanwhile, regime snipers target civilians in a manner reminiscent of the 1990s siege of Sarajevo.

Preventing such actions would be very difficult -- allied airstrikes face the challenge of precisely targeting regime forces in close proximity to civilians, including any human shields deliberately collocated with regime forces. Differentiating between opposition and government forces could also prove difficult, particularly since both sides use identical weapons systems. The difficulties would be compounded if the coalition does not have airstrike controllers on the ground. Together, these factors greatly increase the risk of collateral damage incidents involving civilians, which could in turn degrade allied unity and effectiveness. If the international community permits regime attacks on civilians in western Libya to continue, however, there will be little hope for enforcing the narrow aims of Resolution 1973 or the broader goal of the United States, France, and Britain: namely, to hasten the regime's ouster.

Options for Protecting Civilians

The challenges described above could prove too difficult for the coalition, causing the intervention to essentially wind down while producing two de facto states, with Qadhafi controlling western Libya and the opposition holding the east. For the moment, however, U.S. military commanders are anticipating new phases of the intervention aimed at directly aiding civilians in the west. On March 22, Adm. Samuel Locklear III, commander of U.S. Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn, told reporters: "If Colonel Qadhafi...would have a cease-fire implemented; stop all attacks against citizens and withdraw from the places that we've told him to withdraw; establish water, electricity and gas supplies to all areas and allow humanitarian assistance, then the fighting would stop. Our job would be over." In specifying the places from which regime forces needed to withdraw, he included Zawiyah, Ajdabiya, and Misratah.

How can allied forces meet this ambitious set of operational objectives? Proposals such as attacking regime supply lines would have a decisive impact on the government's ability to recapture the east but would not significantly degrade its ability to terrorize civilians in the west. Accordingly, the coalition should use some combination of the following mechanisms:

- *Geographic safe areas.* On March 21, Gen. Carter Ham, head of U.S. Africa Command, described the difficulty of deciding when strikes on regime ground forces were justified, citing the need to "discern intent" with regard to harming civilians. Allied forces could simplify the task of identifying valid targets by clearly defining geographic safe areas from which regime forces are excluded. Taking the idea a step further, a demarche by the coalition headquarters running the air war could order all regime security forces back to barracks, an option alluded to by Adm. Mike Mullen, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, on March 21. Any regime forces not within designated garrisons would then be legitimate targets.
- *Strategic coercion.* If directly targeting regime forces that are attacking civilians proves too difficult, the coalition could instead punish the regime with indirect retaliation against assets that the Qadhafi inner circle values. Of course, this approach has its own difficulties given that dictators tend to value their own lives and little else. Moreover, coercive targeting is prone to be misunderstood, so any such strikes would need to be backed by a clear communications strategy explaining their purpose to friend and foe alike.

- *Close air support to threatened civilians.* Although Resolution 1973 explicitly excludes "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory," there may be latitude for the insertion of airstrike controllers in cases such as Misratah, where civilians may be facing extreme danger. Assuming covert measures of this kind are not already underway, the option may be worth considering due to the difficulty of precisely targeting enemy forces in urban environments. In past cases where airstrike controllers have been deployed (e.g., to counter the August 2004 Sadrist uprisings in Iraq), U.S. forces have been able to safely employ very precise firepower against enemies operating in close proximity to civilians and significant cultural sites.

Military means should always be firmly connected to political ends. Until a mechanism is developed to protect civilians in the west, the ultimate objective of Resolution 1973 cannot be fulfilled. Clearly enunciating this mechanism will grow increasingly critical in the coming days.

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