

Operation Odyssey Dawn and the Course of the Libyan War

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The ongoing allied intervention in Libya, dubbed Operation Odyssey Dawn, represents a major change in the military situation, but perhaps not a decisive one. It has definitely been a blow to the regime and a boost for the rebels. Nevertheless, UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and its implementation to date leave a number of military issues unresolved. Under some circumstances, the regime and its forces could weather the attacks and continue to hold the territory they have regained from the rebels.

The Operation So Far

Prior to the launch of Odyssey Dawn, the Qadhafi regime was winning the war, consolidating control in the west, maintaining a firm grip on Tripoli, and increasing pressure on the rebel-held areas of Misratah, Zintan, and Nalut. In the east, regime forces were beginning operations against Benghazi after isolating Ajdabiya. In a military sense, the war was likely to be over in a matter of days, with a very bad ending for Qadhafi's internal and external opponents.

Odyssey Dawn was implemented just in time to prevent this outcome. It is a multifaceted operation, including:

- Suppression of the Libyan air defense system to reduce threats to allied air operations. This has already been effective, though it does not directly impact Qadhafi's war with the rebels. It will likely decrease the confidence of regime elements, however.
- Counter-command-and-control strikes to disrupt the regime's ability to control its forces.
- Interdiction of key air bases to limit the regime's ability to conduct air operations, including strike, reconnaissance, and transport missions.
- A no-fly zone over northern Libya to prevent regime air operations there.
- Ground strikes against regime armored and artillery elements that threaten population centers, essentially limited to Benghazi at present.

These activities are having broad but not necessarily decisive effects on the military situation. They have reduced a number of advantages that regime forces previously enjoyed. In particular, allied actions have effectively eliminated Qadhafi's air advantage. This has been a major psychological boost for opposition forces, and likely a psychological blow to the regime and its forces, which are now vulnerable to allied air attacks.

Indeed, allied air-to-ground strikes have already destroyed some regime combat forces, especially tanks, mechanized infantry combat vehicles, and artillery systems operating in eastern Libya -- the very forces that had given the rebels the most trouble. In one strike on March 19, some seventy combat and support vehicles were destroyed, largely blunting Qadhafi's offensive power in the east and likely giving pause to other regime forces operating in the open. Continued attacks on ground elements would limit the regime's mobility and prevent it from concentrating forces for attack. Previously, Qadhafi had been using artillery to bombard opposition forces and civilians, who had no effective response, and then conducting armored raids into rebel-held areas, repeating the process until resistance collapsed.

Attacks on command-and-control (C2) centers have been only a limited part of Odyssey Dawn so far. If continued or expanded, however, they could reduce the regime's ability to plan and coordinate operations, particularly offensive operations in the east.

Continued Regime Advantages

Odyssey Dawn has not addressed all elements of the conflict, however. The regime's ability to move and supply forces over long distances remains a major advantage. Previously, Qadhafi exploited this advantage to mount offensives in the east and reduce rebel-held areas in the west, and it could do so again if allied air-to-ground strikes remain limited or cease altogether.

The regime's leadership has also been able to conceive and execute a largely successful counterrebellion strategy, making the high command a legitimate target. So far, however, it has not been attacked.

As for the rebels, although their defensive situation has improved, nothing has been done to directly restore their offensive capability. There is a major difference between hanging onto territory in defensive actions and taking and holding territory in offensive operations, which are inherently more difficult to plan, control, and sustain. In addition to improved morale, the rebels need better weapons, training, and C2 if they are to take the offensive. One of the consequences of the delay in external intervention is that the rebels have much more ground to retake than they did a week or two ago -- the road distance from Benghazi to Tripoli is some 650 miles.

Future Course of the War

The situation has changed significantly, and both the regime and the rebels will have to adapt. The regime response is likely to involve some combination of continued information operations, further pressure on Misratah and other areas in the west, new tactics to reduce the exposure of ground forces, defensive shifts to make allied forces conduct more aggressive, and less politically palatable, operations, and perhaps a scorched-earth retreat from the east.

The key issue for the rebels is whether they can take advantage of Odyssey Dawn to build up their offensive capabilities and expand their areas of control. Opposition forces have already begun to move west following allied attacks, but it remains to be seen whether they can conduct a sustained offensive against regime forces fighting on the defensive.

Whatever the case, the war may not end quickly or decisively. Much depends on how aggressive and sustained allied operations are, and on how the regime and rebels react to the new situation. Assuming that Odyssey Dawn continues at its present scope and scale, that Qadhafi remains defiant, and that no allied ground intervention is launched, an

extended period of fighting is ahead. Both allied air forces and the rebels face significant operational challenges, such as targeting regime forces that are intermixed with the population in built-up areas or simply holding ground.

In the west, Qadhafi will likely attempt to clear remaining opposition enclaves, especially Misratah. This means some continuing level of offensive or siege activity and raises the question of how allied forces will respond.

In the east, Qadhafi may accept that his forces will not be able to seize Benghazi in the face of allied air strikes. Accordingly, he may attempt to consolidate regime control from Ajdabiya west, leaving a rump state under opposition control in the east, similar to Kurdistan in Saddam-era Iraq.

Several key questions will determine whether the endgame is regime collapse, military stalemate, or some kind of political negotiation:

- Will the coalition act aggressively, interpreting its mandate broadly, or will it limit its operations?
- Will allied forces strike regime ground elements that are not actively attacking civilian areas?
- What will allied forces do about regime attacks on Misratah and other opposition-held areas in the west?
- Will the rebels be able to mount a successful offensive in the direction of Tripoli?

Military Recommendations

Going forward, allied forces should press aggressively to reduce or eliminate Qadhafi's ground capabilities. This should include broad attacks on regime ground forces wherever they can be identified and struck, along with attacks on storage areas, supply and transportation units, and regime logistical operations involving movement of heavy equipment and resupply. In addition, the rebels should be provided with the military means to take the offensive: arms, training, intelligence, and C2 help.

This approach would entail accepting some risk of collateral damage, allied losses, and mission creep. But there is no reward without risk, and the swift departure of the Qadhafi regime seems worth the risk.

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

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