

Libyan Revolution Faces Defeat without External Military Intervention

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Brief Analysis

For several days now, Muammar Qadhafi's forces have notched military successes against Libya's armed opposition, making an outright victory increasingly likely. The revolution is not yet finished, but its prospects are declining rapidly in the face of superior regime capabilities and its own lack of military resources. The regime seems well positioned to grind down the once-promising uprising with heavy firepower, better organization, and ruthless purpose. Such an outcome would leave those Libyans who supported the revolution -- along with most of the international community -- facing a vengeful and triumphant regime. Although sanctions and isolation could force change in Libya, the near term situation is bad, and external military intervention is needed.

Progress of the War

Over the past nine days, the war has gone steadily against the rebels in both the western and eastern theaters. In the west, the regime has consolidated control over Tripoli, effectively ending overt resistance there. It has also reduced and isolated other rebel-held towns, retaking Zawiyah and its oil facilities after a bitter week-long struggle. Misratah remains under rebel control but is closely invested by regime forces and faces increasing pressure from air and ground attack. Although the fight for Misratah will likely be protracted, the city seems doomed to fall to regime forces in the end. This would effectively end the revolution in the west, though the regime might need more time to eliminate resistance in remote towns such as Zintan in the Nafusa Mountains.

In the east, the regime has scored important but not yet decisive successes. It has rolled rebel forces back from their high-water mark at Ras Lanuf, employing a combination of firepower and air attacks to break exposed rebel forces. Despite their handicaps, the rebels had previously been able to dispute control of Ras Lanuf and other key towns such as Marsa al-Burayqah. Nevertheless, the regime pressed on and eventually drove opposition forces out of these areas. Currently, loyalist forces are at the doorstep of Ajdabiya, approximately ninety road miles from Benghazi.

In addition to effectively employing firepower and isolation, the regime is using information operations to convince Libyans and the world that its tide of victory is unstoppable. Government spokesmen make announcements of victories well before they occur and have used the media -- including international outlets -- to present their story through carefully managed tours of retaken areas and loyalist celebrations.

Rebel Advantages Fade

The military determinants that have shaped the conflict from the beginning remain in effect but have shifted more in Qadhafi's favor. Tanks, armored infantry fighting vehicles, artillery systems, aircraft, and other heavy weaponry remain a key factor for the regime, offsetting any rebel advantage in numbers. The regime has also been able to exercise more effective operational and tactical control of its forces than the rebels; the opposition is still relying more on enthusiasm than organization. In addition, Qadhafi has been able to win the logistical battle, showing an impressive ability to keep regime forces in the east supplied over long distances.

Perhaps most important, the rebel advantage in terms of morale and willingness to fight seems to be in decline. Individual fighters seem less willing to stand up to the regime's firepower and more prone to sudden flight, especially in the east, while those who once talked about taking Tripoli and removing Qadhafi now speak of dying as martyrs. Rebel forces in general have not lost the will to fight, but their will to win seems to be fading. This is natural for any force suffering a series of setbacks, regardless of its level of discipline and professionalism. Meanwhile, regime forces continue to attack despite losses and have modified their tactics to reduce their casualties.

The distance factor remains important. The regime enjoys advantages in the west because it is operating close to key bases, but in the east it has to extend forces further and further away from its main base at Sirte, now some 250 miles from the front. It must keep vehicles and equipment running while supplying its forces with ammunition, fuel, food, and water. It must also protect a potentially vulnerable supply line.

Rebel Options

Although the rebel military position is deteriorating significantly, it is not yet hopeless. The opposition retains Misratah in the west, which continues to tie up regime forces and prevent a concentration of effort against rebel forces in the east. Holding the city for as long as possible is important if the opposition is to remain in the fight.

In the east, the rebels must fight for the urban areas remaining under their control, especially Ajdabiya and Benghazi. In addition to attriting regime forces and increasing the strain on regime logistics, serious resistance at Ajdabiya would buy time for the rebels to improve their forces and prepare Benghazi for resistance. It would also give external actors more time to consider intervention. At the same time, the rebels can wage an irregular conflict against regime lines of communication in the east. The regime will have difficulty providing security along the extended and exposed supply line from Sirte to the front, and disrupting this line would complicate Qadhafi's efforts to sustain offensive operations in the east.

The Need for Intervention

The rebels face outright military defeat, whether it comes quickly or after protracted fighting. Assuming there is no external intervention, and factoring in the time needed for the regime to finish operations in the west, consolidate its gains, and reposition its forces, the rebels will likely be ground down in the coming weeks, if not days. In the west, Misratah will fall, perhaps after a relatively long struggle similar to that seen in Zawiyah. In the east, the battle for Ajdabiya will be followed by the battle for Benghazi, or at least isolation and gradual siege of that crucial stronghold.

External military intervention would likely be decisive in preventing this outcome if it came soon enough and was sufficiently robust. "Soon" means days, not weeks -- even a serious threat of intervention could be important in terms of the short-term psychological balance.

In terms of military effectiveness, the best option would be one combining limited air strikes against regime air and ground forces, the creation of no-fly and no-drive zones, and the insertion of ground forces to bolster rebel defenses in the east. This would best be carried out by a coalition of forces from the United States, NATO, and one or more Arab states (perhaps Egypt). Such an approach could be initiated rapidly and escalated in stages if necessary.

Intervention on this level would likely cause the rapid collapse of government forces in the east, with forces in the west succumbing more gradually. In political terms, however, this option would be difficult to green-light.

The next best option would involve U.S./NATO forces, along with one or more Arab states, establishing no-fly zones and providing military assistance to the rebels. This would have a significant military and psychological impact on both sides and could probably be implemented more rapidly than the previous option. It would also be easier to manage politically, although not necessarily easy.

A third option would be to simply establish no-fly zones. Although less effective, this approach would still have some military and psychological impact. It would also be even easier from a political standpoint.

Other proposed options may be less risky or more politically palatable, but they are increasingly unlikely to affect the situation on the ground. Military intervention on some substantial scale seems necessary to prevent a gloomy outcome in Libya. This reality may not be attractive, but neither is a potential Qadhafi comeback.

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

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