

# Options for Military Intervention in Libya

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



## Brief Analysis

Libya's internal conflict is entering its fourth week and shows no signs of coming to a rapid close. The fighting has reached a rough balance, with both sides possessing some strengths but neither able to achieve a decisive military advantage that could end the war. Depending on its scale and scope, military intervention against the regime could alter the balance and push the hostilities to a quicker and more favorable conclusion. Although much of the discussion regarding external action has focused on establishing no-fly zones, that is not the only option -- other approaches entailing greater or lesser risk and complexity should be considered. Any such discussion requires some understanding of the way the war is being fought and the factors shaping its course.

## Ground War

Currently, the ground fighting remains a contest between the numbers and will of the rebels and the firepower and organization of the regime's forces. Government offensives have involved a few battalions of heavy forces with tanks and armored infantry fighting vehicles along with light infantry mounted on sport utility vehicles and trucks, all supported by mortars and rocket launchers. Their tactics have been simple: bombardment, armored vehicle and infantry assaults, and indiscriminate fire. Although government forces have at times penetrated opposition defenses at Zawiyah, Misratah, and Marsa al-Burayqah, they have been unable to consolidate gains there. The rebels in turn have countered such attacks with captured heavy weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and light arms.

Thus far, opposition forces have depended on numbers and resolve to continue the fight. They are equipped with a wide range of weapons, but their heavy weapons are few in number and often employed singly. This makes it difficult to sustain attacks where regime defenses are prepared and organized. The rebels are best at operating in fluid situations where their numbers can overwhelm disorganized and dispirited regime troops. Yet they are vulnerable to heavy firepower and air attack, especially when operating in the open.

## Air War

The air war is quickly becoming more of a factor. The regime has been using airpower to soften the rebels' defenses in key cities, break up their attacks, harass their movements, and strike at their logistics. Airstrikes generally consist of only one or two jets or helicopters, which do not press their attacks and are not very accurate in

delivering munitions. This suggests that the air force is incapable of mounting large attacks with multiple aircraft, and that aircrews are either unable or unwilling to act more aggressively.

The main value of air attacks has probably been psychological -- a factor that should not be discounted. Opposition troops in the open, especially irregulars without air defense, are more likely to panic and become disorganized in the face of airstrikes, while civilian sympathizers are likely to feel vulnerable and helpless. The rebels are highly dependent on the will and commitment of their followers, and the regime's control of the air hampers the opposition's ability to sustain the struggle.

## Military Determinants

The war is being shaped by a number of important determinants, and any external intervention should be carried out with the following in mind:

- Fighting in Libya requires *operating over long distances and controlling large areas*. This factor creates major challenges for logistics, maneuver, and defense for both sides.
- Currently, *firepower* favors the regime. To be sure, this is a wasting asset -- regime forces are incurring combat losses in these systems, and maintenance problems associated with heavy tracked vehicles will inevitably reduce their numbers still more, likely decreasing the regime's firepower advantage. For now, though, the regime has a distinct advantage.
- The opposition seems capable of putting *large numbers of irregulars* in the field. In contrast, the regime is steadily losing regular and mercenary soldiers in the fighting, and these will be more difficult to replace than opposition losses.
- Both sides are relying on stocks of arms and munitions accumulated by the regime prior to the war, and both can probably sustain combat at some level for weeks, if not longer. Keeping combat forces supplied will be a *logistics* challenge given the great distances involved. At present, the regime has an advantage in that it can rely on stockpiles relatively close to the areas of combat. It also has access to intact supply and transportation units in the army and security services. For its part, the opposition will have to find the means of sustaining its forces as they extend from the east to the west. This will require either establishing some sort of supply and transportation capability or capturing weapons and ammunition as they advance.
- Regime forces have an advantage in *command and control* -- they can rely on their existing military communications infrastructure, command structures, and staff. In contrast, the opposition's command and control appears to be rudimentary, with little structure.
- *Intangibles* are a critical element in combat. It remains to be seen whether the forces supporting the regime -- especially mercenaries and conscripts -- will continue to attack or even fight at all in the face of casualties, fatigue, and other stresses. So far, the rebels seem to have high levels of morale and an enthusiasm for engaging regime forces.

In sum, firepower, logistics, and command and control currently favor the regime and account for its ability to stay in the fight. Yet manpower and intangibles seem to favor the rebels, accounting for their ability to take and hold cities and sustain the struggle. Intervention that addresses these military determinants could reduce the regime's advantages while enhancing the opposition's capabilities.

## Types of Intervention

Continued international inaction would likely prolong the conflict and increase the chances of the Qadhafi regime surviving in some form. A number of military measures could be taken to avert such an outcome.

Lower-risk options include:

- Providing the opposition with intelligence about regime force concentrations, movements, and air activity, allowing them to avoid ambushes, prepare defenses, and deploy their forces in optimal fashion.
- Enhancing logistics and support for rebel forces by providing ammunition, fuel, and medical assistance to maintain their operational capabilities and boost morale.
- Enhancing the opposition's command and control by providing communications systems and quick training for rebel commanders.
- Training opposition units on key weapons systems such as antiaircraft guns and missiles, antitank weapons, and artillery systems.
- Supplying rebel forces with game-changing weapons such as advanced antitank and antiaircraft systems to increase the attrition of regime combat forces and reduce their firepower advantage.

Higher-risk options include:

- Providing air defense for liberated areas or humanitarian aid operations in eastern Libya, through either combat air patrols or ground-based air defenses. This would reduce the fear of airstrikes among the population and likely have some deterrent effect on regime air operations. It would not be as complicated or risky as creating a no-fly zone over the entire country.
- Creating no-fly and no-drive zones to reduce the regime's air and ground firepower advantages.
- Conducting airstrikes against critical government military assets (e.g., aircraft, command and control, armored forces, artillery units) to both reduce the regime's capabilities and facilitate the opposition's combat maneuver and operations. This option would carry the most risk but would also have the most direct impact on the war.

In short, the range of potential U.S. and international actions is not limited to either establishing a no-fly zone or doing nothing. The risk to intervening forces varies from option to option, and some would require more time to implement. Yet some of these options could be put into action quickly, with potentially dramatic effect on the conflict.

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

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