

# U.S.-NATO Intervention in Libya: Risks and Benefits

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## Brief Analysis

**M**uammar Qadhafi has vowed to fight to the bitter end, raising the prospect of a protracted and bloody conflict with opportunities for exploitation by radical Islamist elements. Although external military intervention could help prevent a very bad outcome, such action carries its own risks and potential complications.

The United States and other NATO members have the military capability to intervene directly and effectively, reducing the regime's ability to use raw military power against its population. This could be accomplished relatively quickly by using air and naval assets from the U.S. 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean and NATO aircraft from Sicily or southern Italy to establish no-fly, no-drive, and no-sail zones in northern Libya. In addition, intervention could have important psychological effects, bolstering the opposition's morale and weakening that of pro-regime forces.

Although taking military action would have several potentially positive aspects, especially if it extended beyond imposition of no-fly zones, intervention would entail risks along with the potential benefits and could lead to prolonged commitment of military resources.

## Opportunity

**T**he Libyan regime will not go down without a fight, and the result could be a drawn-out struggle. If fortune goes its way, it could even reassert temporary control in some areas it has already lost. In any scenario, there is a great risk that many more people will be killed, as Qadhafi has demonstrated a willingness to employ serious force with military weapons to suppress the opposition. If he is able to stay in power and regain control over lost areas such as Benghazi, he will likely exact violent retribution.

Moreover, the Libyan military has shown signs of unraveling, with some personnel defecting to the opposition, others refusing orders to fire on demonstrators, and some even attacking loyalist elements. The regime's vulnerability, the risk of increased loss of life, and the dangerous possibility of a regime comeback create an opportunity and a need for swift and resolute action.

Qadhafi has reportedly employed fighter jets, attack helicopters, naval units, and various ground combat forces

(including paramilitary elements and mercenaries) against the demonstrators. Some regular army forces may also be supporting the regime. Therefore, the contest is unequal even if opposition elements have acquired weapons and can rely on support from some Libyan army units. Currently, media reports indicate that regime forces have already reasserted control in at least Tripoli.

## Options for Intervention

**U.** S.-NATO intervention could take several forms, and the broader it is, the more effective it is likely to be.

Although the regime has used airpower to some effect, its ground forces will likely be more important in determining the outcome and the cost in terms of casualties. No-fly zones would have little or no impact on the course of ground combat.

*No-fly zone: effects and requirements.* The full extent of the regime's use of fighters and helicopters during the crisis is unclear. Nevertheless, this tactic represents a substantial threat to the opposition, which has little capability to defend against such attacks. A no-fly zone would establish territories off-limits to combat aircraft. By patrolling the skies over northern Libya, U.S.-NATO forces would limit, if not completely eliminate, the regime's ability to employ airpower against its population.

Enforcement of no-fly zones is not a complicated endeavor, but it is resource and planning intensive. Before the first aircraft launches, patrol areas need to be clearly delineated, refueling and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft tracks have to be established, on-call air-to-ground orbits have to be established, and a personnel recovery (PR) rescue force must be in place.

Major command-and-control tasks include populating and providing a gateway for coalition data links, deconfliction of coalition aircraft, monitoring Libyan aircraft and missile launches, and directing intercept on Libyan military aircraft encroaching on no-fly zones.

Air-to-air missions include executing combat air patrols to counter Libyan air force assets, which include Mirage F-1s, MiG 21/23s, Sukhoi SU-22s, Soko J-21s, MI-24 Hind attack helicopters, and an assortment of transport helicopters. Exact numbers of serviceable aircraft are unknown, but the general assessment is that most are in various stages of disrepair.

Because Libya possesses surface-to-air missile capabilities, an on-call suppression of enemy air defense capability would be required to counter SA-2, SA-3, and SA-6 missile batteries.

A robust tanker aircraft force is also required to ensure that all aircraft have endurance for effective patrolling. And PR forces must be on alert to execute a recovery mission should coalition aircraft be shot down. Rescue forces would need to be afloat either in the Mediterranean or in Malta to minimize response time. And consideration would have to be given to deploying HC-130 refueling aircraft, as there are none organic to U.S. Air Force in Europe (USAFE) and only a limited number supporting Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa.

U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily is centrally located in the Mediterranean to support stability operations. It has the airfield capacity and is perfectly positioned to serve as a launch and recover point for patrolling the western portion of any no-fly zones. And Naval Support Activity Souda Bay in Crete is well positioned to provide access to the eastern half of any such zones.

*No-drive zone: effects and requirements.* It may be necessary to prevent the regime from mobilizing and deploying ground forces against the opposition. If the regime hopes to reassert control over areas it has lost, it will need to move substantial forces. No-drive zones could limit its ability to do so, especially with regard to long-distance moves by heavy forces.

Yet there would be serious issues involved in identifying pro-regime forces in the current chaotic situation and

avoiding attacks on opposition elements or civilians. Much of the pro-regime forces appear to consist of militia or mercenary elements, increasing the difficulty of distinguishing them from civilians or opposition groups. To enforce no-drive zones, detailed and agreed-upon target identification and validation criteria/procedures must be established, as well as detailed rules of engagement for any aircraft that could potentially engage surface targets.

Additionally, employment of the high-demand/low-supply Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft would be essential. JSTARS provides the capability of determining direction, speed, and patterns of military activity by ground vehicles and helicopters in order to formulate a picture of the ground situation similar to the air picture provided by AWACS. As a restively scarce capability, the creation of no-drive zones and subsequent operations would likely require shifting deployed aircraft from other theaters and accepting risk there.

*No-sail zone: effects and requirements.* The Qadhafi regime has reportedly used naval units to shell opposition forces. Establishing a no-sail zone to prevent such activity could be accomplished with aircraft and/or surface naval units in the region, including U.S. 6th Fleet forces based in Naples and NATO Allied Joint Force Command Naples. This would broaden the mission and could create the requirement for additional forces, but would further limit the regime's ability to use military power.

## Challenges of Limited Intervention

**S**peed in establishing one or more zones is of the essence in this situation. The required air assets have to be marshaled, organized, and prepared for any operation. Enforcement would require substantial combat and supporting aircraft. It could also require actual combat, including air to air, air to ground/sea, and suppression of air defenses.

Avoiding "mission creep" would be another challenge. Once the operation is underway, there would likely be demands and opportunities to increase the level and scope of operations. Continuing regime attacks on the opposition would likely lead to pressure for more direct intervention, perhaps ultimately including the insertion of ground forces.

## Risks and Benefits

**T**he prospect of combat between U.S.-NATO and Libyan forces carries the inherent potential for casualties. Moreover, no-drive-zone operations would increase the risk of collateral damage, as there could be some difficulty in sorting out friend from foe and avoiding civilian casualties amid the current chaos. The fighting could also escalate beyond initial objectives as a result of either mission expansion or regime attempts to lash out at intervening forces.

More broadly, charges of "colonialism" could be levied against the United States and any participating European states, and these might resonate in some anti-Western quarters in the region and beyond. External intervention could also provoke the regime to attack foreigners in Libya who hail from states involved in the intervention. Finally, the United States and its allies might find themselves in the position of midwifing a bad outcome if the situation degenerated into civil war or chaotic violence, or if radical Islamist elements gained power.

Despite the risks, intervening against the regime could also result in several important benefits. First would be the prospect of saving substantial numbers of lives. If unarmed or poorly armed and disorganized demonstrators challenge heavily armed regime forces in the streets, they will likely continue to be killed in large numbers. The same result is likely if the regime mounts a serious effort to restore authority in lost areas. Second, intervention could lead to a quicker end for the regime, with less political, social, and economic dislocation and damage. However the crisis ends, it will not be pretty, but ending it sooner rather than later seems much more preferable.

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