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Changing Libyan Tactics Pose Problems for NATO

By STEVEN ERLANGER

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PARIS — Angry charges by Libyan rebels that [NATO](#) has failed to come to their aid point up a question that has haunted the Western air campaign from the start: how to avoid a stalemate and defeat the Libyan leader without putting foreign troops on the ground.

NATO officials and the French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, rejected the opposition criticism on Wednesday, saying that bad weather and evolving tactics by forces loyal to Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#) were limiting the air war, which is supposed to be protecting Libyan civilians and driving the colonel's troops to retreat to their barracks. In recent days, Qaddafi forces have stepped up their shelling of Misurata, in the west, and pushed rebels back from some eastern oil towns.

The rebels, of course, are a largely untrained, disorganized fighting force. But the nature of the battle has also changed since a [United Nations](#) resolution authorized "all necessary measures" to protect civilians.

In the early stages of the air campaign, allied warplanes blistered Qaddafi tanks, artillery and transport trucks in the desert outside the rebel capital, Benghazi. But American intelligence reports from [Libya](#) say that the Qaddafi forces are now hiding their troops and weaponry among

urban populations and traveling in pickup trucks and S.U.V.'s rather than military vehicles, making them extremely difficult targets.

“The military capabilities available to Qaddafi remain quite substantial,” said a senior Pentagon official who watches Libya. “What this shows is that you cannot guarantee tipping the balance of ground operations only with bombs and missiles from the air.”

NATO officials, who just [took over responsibility for the air campaign](#) from the United States, deny that their bureaucracy is somehow limiting the campaign. “No country is vetoing this target or that one; it’s not like Kosovo,” where in 1999 some countries objected to certain bombing targets, said a senior NATO official, asking anonymity in accordance with diplomatic practice.

“The military command is doing what it wants to do,” he said.

NATO officials said on Wednesday that NATO was flying more missions every day, and that defending Misurata was a priority. Carmen Romero, a NATO spokeswoman, said that the alliance flew 137 missions on Monday and 186 on Tuesday, and planned 198 on Wednesday. “We have a clear mandate, and we will do everything to protect the citizens of Misurata.”

A rebel spokesman in Misurata said Wednesday that NATO had delivered two airstrikes that pushed the Qaddafi forces away from the port, opening it for vital supply ships. “We have renewed momentum, and our friends are helping us big time,” said Mohamed, a rebel spokesman whose name was withheld for the protection of his family.

“NATO is not the problem,” the senior NATO official said. “The Qaddafi forces have learned and have adapted. They’re using human shields, so it’s difficult to attack them from the air.” While many Western officials have accused the Qaddafi forces of using human shields, they have yet to produce explicit evidence. But they generally mean that the troops take shelter, with their armor, in civilian areas.

The harder question is how NATO will respond to the changed tactics of the Qaddafi forces, which now seem to have achieved a stalemate against the combination of Western air power and the ragtag opposition army.

First, there is a question of whether without the participation of the United States, the rest of the coalition — France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Norway, Qatar and a few others — have the right mix of weapons or enough of them. In particular, the United States uses a jet called the A-10, or Warthog — which flies lower and slower than other airplanes but has cannon that can destroy

armored vehicles — as well as the AC-130, both of which are effective in more built-up areas. The Europeans have nothing similar.

The United States has had [C.I.A. agents on the ground](#) with the rebels in eastern Libya for some time, and there are unconfirmed reports that they may be helping to train the rebel army's raw recruits. Even so, forming a real army that can oust Colonel Qaddafi may take many months, and the coalition is unlikely to be that patient.

That is one reason that allied governments, including the United States and Britain, are urging defections from the Qaddafi circle and hoping that he will be removed from inside. No official, of course, is willing to talk about any covert mission to remove the colonel, except to say that “regime change” is not authorized by the United Nations.

And that is why Britain, Turkey and the United States are all exploring the possibilities of a negotiated solution to the conflict, provided Colonel Qaddafi and his sons relinquish power.

François Heisbourg, a military policy expert at the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris, said, “Given where we are, any deal that removes Colonel Qaddafi from the scene is a deal we should take.”

As for the current air war, NATO is especially sensitive to the criticism that came most scathingly from the leader of the Libyan opposition forces, Gen. Abdul Fattah Younes. He said in Benghazi late Tuesday that “NATO blesses us every now and then with a bombardment here and there, and is letting the people of Misurata die every day.”

Mr. Juppé, whose country has been the most aggressive in defense of the Libyan opposition, said on Wednesday that the situation in Misurata was difficult, but it was complicated by the need to protect civilian lives.

“Misurata is in a situation that cannot carry on,” Mr. Juppé told France Info radio. “But I want to make clear that we categorically asked that there is no collateral damage on the civilian population, so it makes the military interventions more difficult, because Qaddafi's troops understood it very well and are getting closer to the civilian population.”

He said he would bring up the difficulties of Misurata to the NATO secretary general, [Anders Fogh Rasmussen](#).

Rebel leaders have rejected the idea that the Qaddafi forces in Misurata cannot be attacked from the air, saying that the neighborhoods where the troops are concentrated were long ago abandoned by civilians.

Another option is to increase the pressure on Colonel Qaddafi and his sons, although openly changing the objective in Libya from protecting civilians to ousting the Qaddafi family from power would probably shatter the international coalition that is enforcing the United Nations resolution, said Anthony H. Cordesman of the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington.

“Nevertheless,” he added, “the U.S. and its allies need to make hard — if somewhat covert — choices, and make them quickly,” he said in an e-mailed commentary. “The last thing anyone needs at a time when there is near-turmoil from Pakistan to Morocco is a long-lasting open wound of political division and extended conflict in Libya as the worst-of-the-worst authoritarian leaders elsewhere in the region struggle to survive.”

NATO needs to take the rebels’ side more forcefully, he said, despite the neutrality of the United Nations resolution. That could take several forms, he said, among them “killing Qaddafi forces the moment they move or concentrate, rather than waiting for them to attack; striking Qaddafi’s military and security facilities; and finding excuses to strike his compound.”

For Libya, Mr. Cordesman wrote, “a long political and economic crisis and an extended low-level conflict that devastates populated areas” would represent a “net humanitarian cost” that would be “higher than fully backing the rebels, with air power and covert arms and training.”