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In Libya, a perilous endgame

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Almost two weeks of intense bombings and the enforcement of a no-fly zone in Libya by Western-led forces have neither broken the will of Col. Moammar Gadhafi nor subdued his followers. Instead, the past couple of weeks have proved that Libya is much more divided than the world had feared.

The major challenge facing the opposition now will be in reaching out to tribal supporters of Gadhafi -- and skeptics and bystanders -- to allay their fears. This kind of reconciliation will be the only means to avert a protracted, costly civil war that could allow Gadhafi to regain some degree of control.

The coalition's airstrikes have indeed severely degraded Gadhafi's military infrastructure and paved the way for the rebels to recapture, at least for a time, a number of coastal communities and important oil installations, including Ras Lanuf, Brega and Bin Jawad.

But loyalist forces pushed them out in recent days (Ajdabiya and Uqayla still appear to be in rebel hands at the moment). According to Pentagon spokesman Vice Adm. Bill Gortney, any military gains made by the rebels will be tenuous because of their lack of organizational structure.

Two high-level Libyan officials, Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa and Ali Abdussalam el-Treki, did defect this week.

Despite this, Gadhafi's entourage is fiercely defending the cities and towns recaptured from the rebels. That they continue to persevere in the face of international force should not come as a surprise, given the tribal structure of Libyan society and Gadhafi's manipulation and co-opting of tribal divisions and allies.

What is even more alarming is that Gadhafi's forces have managed to insert themselves into urban areas across Libya. To defeat these loyalists will necessitate boots on the ground fighting a long, bloody, guerrilla-style war. Civilians would undoubtedly become targets.

Even if the Western-led coalition arms and trains the rebels and dislodges Gadhafi from power, the morning after will likely be messy, costly and even less certain. Libya appears to be sliding into a prolonged conflict with no light at the end of the tunnel.

The opposition movement burst into play without a well-organized leadership or institutional support. It was spontaneous and even the military personnel who defected to it did not bring with them the heavy arms, infrastructure and organizational skills necessary to make the difference in combat. Although passionate, the rebels lack a centralized, coherent leadership, operational capabilities and command-and-control decision-making. Most lack rudimentary fighting skills.

Can the rebels bridge the widening divide between east and west and swiftly coordinate to create a powerful military organization to force Gadhafi down? This is the x-factor.

There is a real danger that a stalemate will emerge in Libya in which Gadhafi and his henchmen remain in power around Tripoli and the rebels will hold the east, around Benghazi. This would be a terrible outcome, for it would destroy Libya and embroil Western powers in a war-torn country for years. American generals, together with their European counterparts, have already alluded to the risks inherent in the Libyan venture.

Nevertheless, the Western-led alliance must honor the U.N. Security Council resolution, which authorized only protection of Libyan civilians, lest it get bogged down in Libya's shifting sands, fueling anti-Western sentiments in the region. Many in the Middle East who initially supported the West's humanitarian intervention in Libya are beginning to question the military escalation and the West's intentions.

Libyans, not outsiders, should be in charge of enacting change in their society, a difficult task made more complicated by decades of oppression by the Gadhafi regime. In addition to encouraging the opposition to build bridges to Gadhafi's loyalists, the international community should allow the Italians, the African Union and Arab states to offer Gadhafi a diplomatic mechanism out of the deadly embrace.

But the Western powers, particularly the Obama administration, must resist the temptation of military escalation in an effort to engineer regime change. That could backfire and corrupt the nascent democratic movement in Libya.