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Anti-Gadhafi Alliance Faces Difficult Choices on Libya

By Carsten Volkery

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International diplomatic efforts to aid Libyan rebels are currently in overdrive. On Tuesday, European Union foreign ministers met in Brussels; on Wednesday, the recently formed international contact group convened in Doha, Qatar; and, on Thursday, the foreign ministers of NATO member countries will be gathering in Berlin. Although they are searching feverishly for a solution to the conflict in Libya, the chances of finding one soon look slim.

For over three weeks, Western bombers have been launching airstrikes against the forces of dictator Moammar Gadhafi. But the fronts have solidified, and the way out of the conflict is less clear than ever. "It will end at some stage with the departure of Gadhafi," British Foreign Secretary William Hague told the BBC. But, he added, "it's not possible to say on what day or what week that will end."

The resolutions that emerged from Wednesday's meeting of the international contact group in Qatar betray the confusion that reigns within the Western-Arab alliance. For the umpteenth time, Gadhafi was urged to step down, and Italy called for sending arms to outgunned anti-Gadhafi forces. Both of the demands are rather noncommittal and are intended to show that the West hasn't lost its resolve. The only fresh proposal was to set up an international fund that the opposition National Transitional Council in Benghazi could draw upon to organize the administration of rebel-held territory. Doing so would cement the country's division and show that the alliance has dug in its heels for a long conflict.

Still, military experts aren't sure that arming the rebels will really be able to permanently shift the balance of power in Libya. In recent days, the rebels received their first arms shipments, but the weapons didn't seem to strengthen their offensive capabilities significantly. What they need even more than weapons is organization and training. But the fact that such deficiencies cannot be remedied overnight makes a military victory against pro-Gadhafi forces look even less probable.

The West continues to put its hope in a twofold strategy: On the one hand, it wants to increase the pressure on Gadhafi through airstrikes, sanctions and offers of exile. On the other hand, they want to put the rebels in a position to be able to drive Gadhafi out of office and introduce democracy in the country. They do not, however, back the option of negotiating a peace with Gadhafi that the African Union put forward on Monday. Western leaders made that clear once again during their meeting in Doha.

Military and Political Stalemate

Still, there are increasing indications that the alliance is merely biding its time. Even the loud calls from the British and French for more NATO resources in order to intensify the airstrikes, are nothing but a sign of exasperation. It seems to be gradually dawning on Europe's two leading military powers that they have bitten off more than they could chew in Libya. Since the United States began reducing its involvement in military operations last week, responsibility for the lion's share of the airstrikes has fallen to French and British warplanes. But, on their own, the two appear to be incapable of exerting real influence on rebel progress on the ground. Indeed, a stalemate between pro- and anti-Gadhafi forces has developed, which is why the latter are calling for increased NATO support.

But it is hard to see how increased airstrikes would improve the rebels' situation. The real problem is that Gadhafi's forces have changed tactics. Before, they made easy targets for Western warplanes by rolling through the desert in armored vehicles. But now they are hiding their tanks in cities. When they go on the offensive, they now use the same sort of off-road vehicles with lighter weapons that are favored by the rebels, thereby neutralizing the advantage of the allies' air superiority.

In a recent interview with SPIEGEL, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen already admitted that there was [no military solution to the conflict](#). But, at the moment, there is also no political solution on the horizon. The rebels refuse to enter into any talks with the government as long as the Gadhafi clan is in power. And as a precondition for a ceasefire, they demand that government forces withdraw and that Gadhafi step down. But the regime refuses to grant the latter.

Rebels Are Suspicious of Koussa

The role of Moussa Koussa, the former Libyan foreign minister who defected from Gadhafi's regime, is hard to make out. After spending a week in Britain, where he was debriefed by the British foreign intelligence service MI6, he flew to Doha to join in the discussion about Libya's future.

Though not an official participant in the conference, he held a series of talks on the sidelines of the event. Still, his stance toward the Gadhafi government is unclear. He appears to have split with the regime, but he has never publicly called for Gadhafi to step down, preferring instead to push for dialogue aimed at ending the civil war. That makes the rebels suspicious. They do not trust the longtime confidant of Gadhafi and suspect he might actually still be working on the dictator's behalf.

The conference in Doha marked the first meeting of the Libya contact group formed in London two weeks ago. Its members include more than 20 countries and international organizations -- such as the UN, EU and Arab League -- who want to have a political hand in determining how things proceed in Libya. The group also includes countries like Germany that want to be involved in the process despite not playing a role in the air campaign to support the rebels. On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle repeated Germany's offer to deploy its military forces to assist in [delivering humanitarian aid](#) to rebel-controlled territory.

The contact group is scheduled to meet on a monthly basis, and its next gathering will be held in Italy. Observers predict that there will be further meetings after that. And the more times the group meets, the more pressure the alliance will face to negotiate with the Gadhafi regime.

If the military stalemate continues on the ground, sooner or later the international community will be forced to swallow a bitter pill: Either they will have to push Gadhafi out the door through force, which can only be accomplished by deploying ground troops -- something which is not allowed under the current UN mandate. Or they will have to give up their demand that Gadhafi step down -- and sit down with the dictator at the negotiating table.