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United States faced with awkward choices in Libya

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Is it too early to declare our intervention in [Libya](#) a failure?

More than a month after we started bombing, the insurgency has suffered a string of defeats. The government in Tripoli suddenly looks as permanent as the Sahara.

The U.S., after handing off the combat responsibilities to other countries, got pulled back in last week to launch drone attacks. Britain and France are sending military advisers to try to turn the rebels into a semblance of a real army.

These forces are not only poorly trained and badly led but grossly outgunned. As a [New York Times](#) reporter on the scene noted Thursday, "Taken together, the rebels' mismatched arsenal and their inexperience and lack of discipline have made achieving the revolution's military goal extraordinarily hard." If not a failure, this effort is certainly not a success.

The [NATO](#) campaign may have accomplished its simplest goal: keeping [Moammar Gadhafi's](#) forces from capturing the rebel stronghold of [Benghazi](#). [President Barack Obama](#), on the basis of scant evidence, claimed that was necessary to prevent a bloodbath.

But any innocent lives saved in Benghazi may be lost elsewhere as the war settles into a bloody stalemate. Already, hundreds of civilians have been killed in the siege of Misrata, a city of 300,000, and the fight is not over.

The Obama administration imagined that a taste of the lash would put Gadhafi in his place. Either he would stop his attacks, or he would be forced from power, or both. But neither has happened, and neither is about to. Some insiders even worry that he will soon be able to launch a new offensive to take Benghazi.

That leaves Obama in an awkward position. Before we jumped in, the president declared that the colonel "must go." If there was any doubt about Gadhafi's fate, the NATO campaign was supposed to dispel it. While insisting that toppling the tyrant was not part of our mission, Obama acted as though it were a *fait accompli*, thanks to us.

"It may not happen overnight," he assured the American people, "as a badly weakened Gadhafi tries desperately to hang on to power. But ... history is not on Gadhafi's side. With the time and space that we have provided for the Libyan people, *they will be able to determine their own destiny*, and that is how it should be." (my italics)

Apparently no one informed the dictator. "Gadhafi's people are feeling quite confident," one European security official tells Reuters, predicting the civil war will produce a "de facto partition for a long time to come," with Gadhafi retaining control of most of Libya.

Is that an acceptable outcome? Not from what the administration has said. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) said last month, "This is a man who has no conscience. If he stays, we can't predict what he will do."

But it looks like he will stay. If so, Obama will have two unwelcome options: He can slink away after failing to achieve the goal he proclaimed or expand the [U.S. military](#) mission in hopes of getting our way.

The new status quo could be worse than the old one. In recent years, Gadhafi had given up his militant stance toward the West, going to great lengths to rehabilitate his regime.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/ct-oped-0424-chapman-20110424,0,283906.column>He stopped his nuclear weapons program, agreed to compensate the relatives of those killed in the 1988 [Lockerbie bombing](#) and cooperated so closely with the United States that Sen. [Joe Lieberman](#), I-Conn., called him "an important ally in the war on terrorism." [President George W. Bush](#) took Libya off the U.S. government list of terrorist supporters.

Now, however, Gadhafi could resume his old troublemaking ways. And if Libya falls into disorder, parts of it may become a lawless haven for violent Islamists. Does "Afghanistan" mean anything to you?

Faced with the prospect of Gadhafi hanging on to power, Obama may find himself reconsidering his pledge not to use American ground troops. The only thing presidents dislike more than escalating wars is losing wars.

Obama can take no solace in the complaint of [President Lyndon Johnson](#) as he pondered Vietnam in March 1965, before the big U.S. buildup: "I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I've got. So what the hell can I do?"

