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## NATO's New Problem: Post-Qaddafi Libya?

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After weeks of very little movement either militarily or diplomatically in Libya, there are apparent developments on both fronts in recent days. Rebel forces, aided by NATO's air support, finally appear to be [advancing into western Libya](#)<sup>[3]</sup> and cutting off supply lines to Tripoli, the long-time stronghold of support for Muammar Qaddafi. And [reports](#)<sup>[4]</sup> are swirling about secret negotiations that might provide a peaceful exit from the country for the aging dictator.

Those developments underscore that U.S. and NATO officials urgently need to consider what strategy they intend to pursue if Qaddafi's more than four-decade hold on power finally comes to an end. That is more crucial for the leaders of the European members of the alliance, since Libya is located on Europe's Mediterranean flank, but because the Obama administration unwisely chose to involve the United States in Libya's internecine conflict by launching air strikes, it has become a pertinent issue for Washington as well.

The outlook for a post-Qaddafi Libya is midpoint between sobering and depressing. It is possible that the warring parties will accept a de facto division of the country between the eastern and western tribes, although a formal agreement to that effect is unlikely. Even an informal partition would [more accurately reflect the demographics, politics, and history of that territory](#)<sup>[5]</sup> than an insistence on keeping Libya intact. Moreover, the most probable alternatives to a peaceful territorial division would be a continuous, simmering civil war or a rebel victory that would merely breed resentment in the western part of the country and pave the way for a new round of fighting a few years from now. The NATO powers must confront the question of how much they are willing to assist the insurgents in maintaining control of western Libya once Qaddafi is gone. Prospects are not good that a government formed by the eastern-dominated rebel forces would be able to win even a modest number of influential converts from the western tribes. And if the problem of achieving and maintaining political control was not enough of a challenge for the insurgents and their NATO sponsors, there is the matter of repairing the infrastructure damaged in the fighting and replenishing the now largely empty Libyan treasury. A new government in Tripoli cannot count on oil revenues in the short or medium term to remedy those problems. Experts [estimate](#)<sup>[6]</sup> that it will be at least three years before oil production can return to pre-war levels.

Libya's probable security and economic difficulties will create tremendous pressure on NATO to provide extensive financial aid and deploy peacekeeping forces. Therein lies the danger to the United States. Logically, if NATO does deploy ground forces, they should come overwhelmingly

from France and some of the other countries bordering the Mediterranean. Those nations have the most at stake in trying to stabilize Libya. NATO members in central and northern Europe (with the exception of Britain) have shown little desire to engage in such a mission. So far, the Obama administration has indicated that the United States will not put ground forces into Libya either—a wise exercise in restraint.

But given the financial woes of Italy, France, and other key European members of the alliance, and given the habitual desire of the Europeans to off-load security problems onto the United States as NATO's leader, it is all too likely that we will see a concerted campaign to get Washington's participation in a post-Qaddafi peacekeeping mission. The Obama administration should firmly reject such overtures. Washington's agenda is already more than full with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the NATO nation-building missions in Bosnia and Kosovo provide [7] ample [8] evidence [9] that a similar venture in Libya could prove extremely lengthy, expensive, and frustrating. President Obama should resist any temptation to involve the United States further in Libya's domestic quarrels.

More by

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[5] <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/another-war-choice-5043>

[6] [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Energy-Resources/2011/08/16/Outlook-grim-for-Libyan-oil-production/UPI-40651313492942/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2011/08/16/Outlook-grim-for-Libyan-oil-production/UPI-40651313492942/)

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