

PolicyWatch #1768

Fighting in Libya: The Military Balance

By [Jeffrey White](#)

March 2, 2011

The uprising in Libya has evolved into a significant military struggle. The Qadhafi regime and, to a lesser extent, its opponents are employing substantial levels of violence, including the use of heavy weapons. Thousands have been killed and wounded.

At the moment, the military balance lies somewhat in favor of the opposition. Regime forces have suffered significant losses in weapons systems and personnel, and have had difficulty retaking areas. Nevertheless, the government is fighting hard to hold onto Tripoli and drive the opposition out of cities it has seized. The regime is not yet out of the fight, and a prolonged, violent struggle is shaping up.

Course and Geography of the Conflict

The conflict erupted over a wide area of Libya beginning on February 15, with civil disturbances in Tripoli and Benghazi spreading rapidly to other cities and intensifying. At least twenty-two cities have been caught up in the turmoil, most prominently the key coastal communities where most of the population and oil export terminals are concentrated. Urban areas in the interior, including the far south, have also been involved.

By February 23, the regime had effectively lost the east, with Benghazi, al-Bayda, Ajdabiya, Darnah, Tobruk, and other cities under opposition control. The opposition has been less successful in the west, although it has taken several major communities, such as the hotly disputed Misratah, which fell on February 27, and Zawiyah. Even in these cases, however, regime forces are reportedly still operating nearby and attempting counterattacks to retake the cities. Meanwhile, Tripoli remains under regime control, and the opposition appears to have been largely suppressed there.

Major Military Developments

Several factors have influenced the course of the fighting. First was the regime's collapse in the east within only a few days, a development attributed to surprise at the scale and scope of the demonstrations, the defection of regular army personnel, and the opposition's determination even in the face of serious violence.

Second was the relative effectiveness of opposition forces. With primitive or light weapons (at least initially), little apparent organization, and little or no military training, the demonstrators succeeded in overcoming government security forces. The opposition has since become better armed and organized thanks to the participation of former regime military personnel.

Third was the collapse of cohesion within the regular military. As early as February 17, some regime security personnel were refusing to fight or were even defecting. This unraveling has continued, weakening the regime's ability to respond and boosting the opposition's capabilities.

Fourth was the regime's willingness to deploy heavy weapons against the opposition. Tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and fixed- and rotary-wing combat aircraft have all been used in the fighting.

Most of these developments have favored the opposition. To be sure, the regime continues to control key areas in the west, carry out coordinated operations, and conduct long-range reinforcement activities and local tactical and operational movement. Yet its limited ability to retake other areas suggests difficulties in massing and coordinating large forces and a lack of willingness among certain personnel to engage in serious fighting.

Types of Forces

The regime has used at least five different kinds of forces against the opposition: regular army, air force, and navy units; regime security forces, including the well-equipped Khamis Brigade, a praetorian unit named after and led by one of Qadhafi's sons; organized, government-sponsored militia elements; foreign and domestic mercenaries; and pro-regime civilians who have been provided with light arms. Although the performance of these elements has been mixed, the government has been able to hold on wherever it has achieved a substantial concentration of forces.

Opposition forces appear to consist of two types: large numbers of essentially unarmed or lightly armed demonstrators, and military personnel who have defected from the regime, including perhaps some small units. Some opposition elements have been observed using military weapons (e.g., tanks, armored infantry fighting vehicles, heavy anti-aircraft machine guns, anti-tank weapons), but with little apparent organization. This is in addition to the large numbers of military-type small arms now in their possession.

Regime Tactics

The government's approach has centered on holding or retaking cities and airfields. The fight for the cities is the primary struggle, but airfields have emerged as important places from which the regime can assert residual control, such as supporting air strikes and troop movements. Qadhafi apparently seeks to establish and secure an area of control from Marsa al-Burayqah in the east to the Tunisian border.

Regime tactics against the opposition have included the use of snipers, heavy automatic weapons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. In addition, roving patrols of mercenaries and militia have employed live fire to clear and control the streets and prevent demonstrations from forming. In areas where the regime has lost control, it is using a combination of heavy and light forces to conduct counterattacks. The regime has employed fighter jets and helicopters to attack arms depots and communications facilities seized by the opposition and is using transport aircraft and helicopters to move forces. Indeed, the threat of air attack has been a significant concern for opposition forces. The regime is also employing information operations to control the flow of information and the narrative of the struggle. These actions have included disrupting communications, limiting the information available to both the Libyan public and the external world, and engaging in extensive pro-regime propaganda activity.

Outlook

Initial expectations that the opposition's progress was unstoppable have been somewhat blunted -- the regime has proven more resilient than it appeared to be in the early days of the uprising. No matter how bizarre Qadhafi's public appearances have been, loyalists are mounting an organized and determined fight to preserve his rule. For its part, the opposition has been hampered by lack of military organization, limited firepower, and emergent political rivalries. It has already shown some difficulty in mounting an effort to seize Tripoli by force or to reinforce other disputed areas. All of these factors suggest that the fight may be protracted and costly.

Still, the opposition seems to have the upper hand. It has great determination, the support of a significant part of the population (although not all of it), and control over many key cities. Meanwhile, the regime has lost much of its military capacity and has no way to rebuild it, at least in the short term. With no real foreign allies to call upon, it is essentially fighting to retain control of an enclave within the country.

The conflict will likely evolve in one of three broad directions:

1. The regime could collapse quickly under the pressure of continuing opposition advances, its own isolation, and disintegration within the security forces.
2. A prolonged struggle could develop because neither side has the capability to quickly defeat the other. This could result in a period of continuing clashes, perhaps some form of negotiations, and regime attempts to break its isolation through promises of reform.
3. By taking advantage of opposition infighting and logistical problems, the regime could begin to reassert itself and retake lost areas.

Of the three scenarios, the second seems most likely, as both sides lack the offensive capability to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion.

Implications

A prolonged struggle would have several important consequences. First, as the fighting became more serious, casualties would increase, as would damage to the economy and infrastructure. This would heighten humanitarian concerns and produce more internal and external refugees. Second, increasing casualties or a protracted conflict would increase pressure for external military intervention. Most of the attention so far has been on establishing no-fly zones, but these may be inadequate to deal with Qadhafi's remaining forces. The regime's key instruments are ground units, so no-drive zones or airstrikes would likely be needed to truly curtail its ability to move against the opposition.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs.

Copyright 2011 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy