

# WebMemo



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## Thinking Past the No-Fly Zone Debate: Charting a Course for U.S. Policy

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Libya's increasingly bloody conflict has inspired more calls for U.S. military intervention, with many clamoring for the imposition of a no-fly zone over the North African country.

Imposing a no-fly zone could raise the morale of "rebel" forces, back Colonel Muammar Qadhafi into a tighter corner politically, and fill a reflexive need felt by western powers to do something beyond rhetoric and economic sanctions in the wake of the unfolding three-week-old crisis.

However, while such a military operation would address some of the symptoms of Libya's civil war, it would not address the cause: the continued repression meted out by Qadhafi's dictatorship. Based on recent reporting, preventing Qadhafi's air force from taking to the air may not be a game-changer. It would not halt the killing on the ground, where the pitched battles are being fought, or decisively tilt the balance of power against Qadhafi, who has a land power advantage over the rebels. Moreover, it could divert critical U.S. military assets from important missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Washington should resist the impulse to impose a no-fly zone just to do something. Washington and its allies should carefully consider options that will decisively impact the Libyan crisis.

**No-Fly Zone No Silver Bullet.** Much has been made about Qadhafi's air campaign against rebel forces and civilians in recent days. Qadhafi's air force, while visible, has largely been ineffective in purely military terms. It has been used more as a

psychological weapon than as an integral part of a unified combat strategy.

Mohammed Abdel Salim, a member of the Libya military who defected to the rebels, was quoted by *The Christian Science Monitor* on March 8: "If we didn't have to fear the planes, we'd be advancing much more quickly." However, taking Zawiyah as a case example, Qadhafi's forces relied on tanks, artillery strikes, and infantry to recapture the city from rebel forces. Air strikes to this point have largely been focused on strikes in the eastern part of the country, targeting roads, ammunition depots, oil terminals, and rebel positions in an attempt to frighten and demoralize opposition. Although a no-fly zone would halt these attacks, it might be woefully insufficient to help opposition forces bring down Qadhafi's regime.

Libya's air force on paper was less than 400 aircraft before the crisis, and many of those were non-operational. Libya's warplanes are a mix of old and poorly maintained models obtained mostly from the former Soviet Union and France. Given the poorly maintained state of Libya's aging air force and the recently imposed U.N. Security Council arms embargo, Qadhafi will not be able to sustain these aircraft for long. Furthermore, reports indicate that

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the bombing skills of Libyan pilots are poor, and they are having difficulty hitting rebel military targets. The regime has also used combat helicopters with minimal effectiveness.

In terms of airpower, Qadhafi's transport planes are actually more of a significant factor in the fighting than his attack aircraft, though they receive little attention. The distance between Benghazi and Tripoli is about 400 miles by air and about 630 miles by the fiercely contested coast road. The ability to transport men and materials swiftly by air is a considerable threat to the rebel forces in the east, as they lack a similar ability to move rapidly on Tripoli. The regime also reportedly uses aircraft to transport African mercenaries recruited in Chad and Niger from the southern town of Sabha to reinforce its positions elsewhere. There may be options other than imposing a no-fly zone that would be more efficacious in limiting this capability.

**Moving Forward.** Libya has plunged into a civil war, torn between supporters of a corrupt and tyrannical regime and those willing to risk everything in the hope of tearing it down, with many more caught in between. The international community needs to do more than simply impose a no-fly zone, for the war will be won on the ground. Qadhafi has publicly warned Libyans that any no-fly zone will be used by the West to seize Libya's oil, not to protect their lives.

In the meantime, the White House should:

- **Recognize that imposing a no-fly zone would likely divert U.S. military and intelligence assets** from other critical missions currently underway.

- **Move quickly to determine a desired end state to the situation in Libya, supported by a strategy for achieving it.** So far this has been absent in the Administration's rhetoric.
- **Take steps to identify—and possibly officially recognize—an opposition in Libya that supports our end game in the country.** Recognition of the opposition movement would give added weight to the Obama Administration's calls for Qadhafi to step down.
- **Avoid direct military intervention at this point,** but look to indirectly support an opposition that supports U.S. objectives in Libya.

The evolving situation in Libya is, without a doubt, as challenging a policy question as an administration might face. Regardless, it is incumbent upon the Obama Administration to move beyond the seeming policy paralysis that has gripped the White House so far on Libya, and finally lay out a course of action for this nation that protects and advances U.S. interests in Libya and the surrounding region. Anything less is a failure of leadership.

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