

# WebMemo



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## Washington's To-Do List for Libya: Next Steps Must Be Measured

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The President has committed U.S. forces in Libya. The question now is: What next? The President has yet to outline a clear and certain course. The best option would be to minimize the commitment of the U.S. military, look after the best interests of Libya's civilian population, and limit the spread of terrorism and instability throughout the region. The President and the Congress should take the following actions.

**Avoid "Mission Creep."** First and foremost, the President must clearly articulate the mission of U.S. operations in Libya and clarify U.S. interests. Neither stating that the U.S. is helping "protect civilians" nor declaring that American ground troops will not be applied is sufficient. Stating that the U.S. is not pursuing "regime change" is a declaration of what the mission is not, not what it is. A clear declaration of purpose is vital to avoid "mission creep"—an expansion of commitments beyond the original goal of the operation.

The U.S. does have legitimate interests in the outcome: bringing Muammar Qadhafi to justice, not seeing the country become a terrorist haven, preventing a humanitarian crisis and a wave of refugees that could overwhelm our European allies, stopping the spread of civil war to bordering nations. These concerns fall short of vital interests that would justify significant, protracted operations by U.S. forces and can be addressed through measures short of war. Even at this point, it is difficult to endorse further military operations without a clear understanding of their scope and purpose.

**Congress Must Speak.** In any military operation, initial plans never survive first contact with the enemy. This was seen hours after the vote in the U.N. Security Council resolution when Qadhafi tried to forestall military action by unilaterally declaring a cease-fire. Military planners should lay out "branches" (alternative plans if the initial ones fail) and "sequels" (follow-on plans to exploit success).

For example, what would the U.S. do if Qadhafi's regime collapses? What would the U.S. do if Qadhafi launches terrorist attacks against the U.S. or its allies? The Administration has had ample time to develop those plans and should be briefing leaders in Congress on them now so that a determination can be made if a resolution to employ force is now required or should be in the future. Congress and the White House should seek common ground now—not after the President announces the next troop deployments—on what is prudent.

**Empower the Opposition.** The U.S. should no longer recognize the government in Libya. Limiting the capacity of Qadhafi's military was always well within the capabilities of coalition forces backed by the U.S. The question has always been: What

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comes next? If the U.S. and other interested nations wish to avoid protracted military engagement, they must position for success by identifying and supporting a “legitimate” opposition that is free from terrorist taint.

It is too soon to determine whether the opposition should be backed with sufficient resources and support to storm Tripoli—a rush to Tripoli by a disorganized and ill-prepared military force might only serve to exchange the threat of a humanitarian crisis in Benghazi for one in the capital—or be given adequate support to defend itself. Neither of these options would be cheap or risk free, but they are more manageable than protracted U.S. engagement.

Likewise, supporting the opposition would include expanding its capacity to govern, provide goods and services, and restore the Libyan economy. In this manner, as the rebels expand their authority in the country, they will be able to do so in a manner that looks after the civilian population—a better solution than enforcing an immediate regime change, which might result in chaos and put the whole population at risk.

Supporting the opposition may require circumnavigating the prohibition against arming them in U.N. Security Council resolutions (Resolution 1970 prohibited the supply of arms to anyone in Libya; Resolution 1973 is ambiguous). Meanwhile, the U.S. should continue to work to isolate Qadhafi’s regime in every way possible with the goal of one day bringing him to justice.

**Build a Sustainable Coalition.** Libya’s neighbors, being closest to the problem, have the most to lose by Qadhafi remaining in power, chaos reigning in the country, or seeing portions of Libya becoming a terrorist safe haven and training ground. They should bear the majority of the cost and responsibility for support going forward.

Britain and France will hopefully assume responsibility for the bulk of air support duties, backed by Denmark, Norway, Spain, and as many Arab countries as possible. Wealthy members of the Gulf Cooperation Council—the first international body to call for military action in Libya—should help finance the operation, if not send their own warplanes to enforce it.

**Be on Guard.** If Qadhafi remains in power, he will undoubtedly seek revenge against his enemies or may seek to reacquire weapons of mass destruction technologies. Likewise, al-Qaeda could, as it has sought to do elsewhere, seek to use the country as a battleground to recruit and train terrorists. The U.S. must be prepared to deal with terrorists trying to smuggle foreign fighters into Libya or arms and support to Qadhafi.

**Rethink Military Cuts.** If there is one thing (and one thing only so far) to be learned from this incident, it is to be wary of what the future may bring. This is the third “unanticipated” conflict that the U.S. has entered in just over a decade. Congress and the Administration must now carefully consider the impact of these operations on readiness and modernization. By some estimates, operations are already costing over half a billion dollars per day. Paying for these operations is detracting from other missions and readiness.

Since Congress failed to pass a fiscal year 2011 defense budget, the Pentagon is already facing the prospects of being under-funded by tens of billions of dollars this fiscal year. These operations will exacerbate that shortfall. Furthermore, many have proposed further cuts in stealth aircrafts, carrier battle groups, and amphibious capabilities—precisely the kinds of assets that even made conducting this mission possible. Faced with chaotic and uncertain future in the Middle East, as well as other global defense requirements, now is not the time to be cutting the capabilities of the armed forces.

**No Magic Button.** There is no magic button for solving the problems of Libya. No option is risk-free. The Administration and Congress, however, should adopt the most prudent course, recognizing that protecting U.S. interests and playing a positive role in the region will require limited but long-term engagement.

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