

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3238
April 28, 2011

How the U.S. Should Help Libya's Struggling Opposition

James Phillips

Libya's opposition movement is a work in progress. Because it was forged in an ad hoc manner under the pressure of fast-moving events, it lacks sufficient organization, technical expertise, military capabilities, and funding to pose an immediate threat to Muammar Qadhafi's control of western Libya.

While the Obama Administration should minimize its military involvement, Washington should assume a leadership role in supporting a credible opposition—one free of terrorist taint and committed to the interests of the Libyan people. The Administration has offered to provide non-lethal aid to the Libyan rebels and should consider giving them access to the regime's frozen assets and help with facilitating oil exports. But Washington should consider providing further assistance only when it can ensure that such aid will not benefit Islamist extremists, who form a small portion of the loose opposition coalition.

Libya's Disorganized Opposition. The opposition, forged in a spontaneous uprising, remains poorly organized. It currently lacks a charismatic leader capable of rallying support and acting as a unifying force to challenge Qadhafi. The Transitional National Council, which was established as an umbrella group to lead the opposition, contains some figures known in the West but also many unfamiliar faces, and little is known about its inner workings. It lacks funding and administrative experience and is having difficulty transforming itself into an effective government. So far, only France,

Italy, and Qatar have recognized the council as Libya's legitimate government.

The rebel military force, cobbled together on the fly and largely composed of untrained civilian volunteers and defectors from the Libyan army, has a long way to go before it can be transformed into an effective fighting force. It lacks experienced leadership, effective organization, heavy weapons, adequate communications, reliable logistical support, and command and control. It will take months if not years to organize, arm, and train the ragtag rebel militia and transform it into a military force strong enough to oust Qadhafi.

Khalifa Hiftar, a 67-year-old exile who lived in the United States for 24 years before returning to Libya last month, has been appointed field commander of the disorganized rebel forces. He appears to be embroiled in a personal rivalry with Abdul Fattah Younis, the nominal commander of the rebel forces, who was formerly commander of Libya's special forces and Qadhafi's interior minister before defecting. Hiftar has asked Washington to provide armored personnel carriers, reconnaissance vehicles, rockets, and "cutting edge" weapons. The Obama Administration has agreed to provide non-lethal equipment but not arms.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3238>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The British government announced on April 19 that it will deploy a team of senior military officers to Libya to advise the opposition, although it would not directly supply arms to the rebels. France and Italy are also sending military advisers. U.S. officials say Saudi Arabia and Qatar are willing to provide weapons and other support to the rebels. Qatar has reportedly already provided shoulder-fired anti-tank rockets,¹ and it hosted an April 13 meeting of the Contact Group on Libya—a coalition of 21 NATO, Arab, and African governments that have pledged to help the opposition meet its urgent needs.

Cautious U.S. Support. The Obama Administration has hesitantly made contact with the opposition but has not yet recognized it as a de facto government. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has met with opposition leaders and dispatched diplomat Chris Stevens to Benghazi to learn more about the opposition's leadership, goals, structure, and capabilities. President Obama reportedly signed a covert action finding that authorized the CIA to dispatch intelligence operatives to Libya to find out more about the rebels and consider a range of options for helping them.²

As the President considers his next step, caution is appropriate. U.S. and European counterterrorism officials have warned that some members of the opposition were involved in militant Islamist groups that dispatched fighters to battle American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, although there was little evidence that these elements have assumed leadership roles within the opposition. Intelligence officials have also expressed concern that the Al-Magharba tribe in the Ras Lanuf region may include significant numbers of Islamist extremists.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional al-Qaeda franchise that includes many Libyans, has reportedly raided arms depots in southern Libya and acquired shoulder-fired anti-aircraft mis-

siles and other weapons.³ Admiral James Stavridis, NATO's supreme commander, told a congressional committee last month, "We have seen flickers in the intelligence of potential al-Qaeda" and Hezbollah fighters among opposition forces.

An Islamist militia has played a prominent role in the city of Derna, which has been a fertile recruiting ground that has sent a stream of Islamist extremists to fight U.S. forces in Iraq. Derna and Benghazi, the opposition's stronghold, have long furnished support for the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an Islamist extremist movement crushed by the Libyan regime, which formally merged with AQIM in 2007. At least one of the leaders of the "Derna Brigade," a rebel military unit, was formerly a detainee at Guantanamo who was considered to be "a probable member of Al-Qaeda."⁴

What the Administration Should Do. The Obama Administration should:

- **Provide non-lethal military equipment.** The rebel army suffers from poor command and control in large part because it lacks a reliable communications network. Washington should provide secure communications gear to improve the effectiveness of the force along with boots, helmets, and food rations.
- **Provide intelligence on regime forces.** The rebels would greatly benefit from intelligence on the location, movement, and plans of regime forces gleaned from drones, manned aircraft, satellites, and communications intercepts.
- **Bolster opposition finances.** The United States has frozen over \$34 billion in assets controlled by the regime. It should return these assets to the Libyan people, from which they were stolen, by giving the opposition access to the funds.
- **Facilitate opposition efforts to export Libyan oil.** Oil pipelines and other facilities have been

1. Mark Hosenball and Phil Stewart, "U.S., Allies See Libyan Rebels in Hopeless Disarray," Reuters, April 14, 2011, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/14/us-libya-usa-rebels-idUSTRE73D68S20110414> (April 27, 2011).

2. Karen DeYoung and Greg Miller, "CIA Studies Libya's Rebels," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2011, p. A1.

3. Agence France-Presse, "Al-Qaeda Snatched Missiles in Libya: Chad President," *Defense News*, March 25, 2011, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=6060143> (April 27, 2011).

4. Rod Norland and Scott Shane, "Libyan, Once a Detainee, Is Now a U.S. Ally of Sorts," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2011, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/world/guantanamo-files-libyan-detainee-now-us-ally-of-sorts.html> (April 27, 2011).

damaged by fighting and regime sabotage in rebel-held territory in eastern Libya. Washington should lead an international effort to repair the damaged oil infrastructure and help the opposition to export oil as soon as possible.

- **Court traditional tribal leaders.** Libya's tribes are important for mobilizing support in the absence of functioning political parties and civic institutions. Tribal leaders could play an important role in encouraging further defections from Qadhafi's regime and building support for the rebels.

Conditional Aid. Further U.S. assistance should be dependent on conditions on the ground. The U.S.

and its allies should not inadvertently strengthen Islamist forces with well-intentioned aid that winds up in the wrong hands. Instead, they should work to support and strengthen a credible opposition that can protect and provide for the areas liberated from the regime and combat efforts by Islamist extremists to expand their influence and to establish a pipeline for foreign fighters into Libya.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*