

Gaddafi's forces: Bombed but not broken

As dictator stands firm, Britain lowers its expectations of 'victory'

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REUTERS

A defiant Gaddafi supporter at a naval facility in Tripoli damaged by coalition air strikes

The Western allies yesterday struggled to find a coherent strategy in [Libya](#) as Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's forces renewed attacks on rebel strongholds despite a no-fly zone and a fourth day of allied strikes against government military targets. In Washington, top officials insisted the US intended to hand over command of the operation to its allies within days, but wrangling within Nato continued yesterday along with confusion over what the mission was increasingly clear that despite the scale of the damage inflicted on Colonel Gaddafi's forces, the rebels were highly unlikely to achieve a military victory.



In London, a Government minister acknowledged the crisis could end in stalemate, and partition of the country. "A stable outcome where they weren't killing each other would, in a sense, be one way of achieving the humanitarian objective," the armed forces minister Nick Harvey told the BBC.

At the same time, he went further than any British minister yet and refused to rule out the deployment of British forces on the ground, claiming there was a clear distinction between sending in a full-scale occupation force – explicitly barred by the UN Security Council's Resolution 1973 – and a more limited operation.

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Asked how long Britain would be involved in the military operation in north Africa he replied: "How long is a piece of string? We don't know how long this is going to go on for."

President Barack Obama, who last night cut short a trip to Latin America to return to Washington, called key leaders to try to agree a co-ordinating command role for the alliance and reduce the risk of the US becoming bogged down in another war in a Muslim country. According to US officials, the heavy "front-end" phase of the intervention will soon be over, with the main objectives achieved.

Officials in France and Britain have been working on a plan to pass political control of the campaign to a "committee" of states providing military support to the no-fly zone but with operational control being run under the Nato command structure. This would be backed up by a wider international "Contact Group on Libya" – similar to the one set up to deal with the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict.

This would be at foreign-minister level and would include countries not included in the "no-fly" coalition. It would be charged with examining the "whole shape and nature of the on-going crisis", a Government source said. It would also be expected to have a role in any post-Gaddafi political reconstruction in Libya. The three-pronged plan is intended to defuse a dispute over the medium-term [political leadership](#) of the anti-Gaddafi coalition. The US, Britain and others want the campaign to be run by Nato, but Turkey and Germany oppose this.

Last night, there was no sign the heavy Western bombardment had shifted the balance decisively in favour of the poorly armed anti-Gaddafi forces. Libyan government forces were fighting back last night on the eastern front line near the key city of Ajdabiya. The counter-attack followed the failure of rebel forces to take the city on Sunday despite air attacks having destroyed regime tanks and artillery. By yesterday evening, there were reports that the regime's [troops](#) were moving south once again to threaten the route to Tobruk and the Egyptian border.

US Admiral Samuel J Locklear, the on-scene commander of allied forces, confirmed last night that civilians were under attack by government forces in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city. The coalition was "considering all options", he said.

In Washington, complaints were growing yesterday from some Democrats as well as Republicans – with some saying the US was doing too little, others that the President was dragging the country into a costly conflict without properly consulting Congress. But Mr Obama himself has only added to the uncertainty by reiterating the US still wanted Col Gaddafi to leave power, although the formal goal of the intervention was merely to protect Libya's civilian population.

In one encouraging sign for Washington and London however, two Qatari fighter jets arrived at a Greek base on Crete yesterday. This brings nearer the direct Arab involvement in enforcing the no-fly zone that the US has been seeking to dispel the impression of another solely Western onslaught against a Muslim country,.

The French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppé, told the French parliament yesterday that a compromise deal would see a "political steering group" of coalition foreign ministers plus the Arab League take over political direction of the air campaign. Mr Juppé said the idea had been accepted by Britain and others and that the first meeting of foreign ministers would take place in Paris, London or Brussels in the "next few days". It was not immediately clear whether the US would participate in this group.

Avoiding a straightforward "Nato" political label is crucial, France argues, because the Arab world is hostile to the Atlantic alliance. It would also be politically cumbersome because of the opposition to the Libyan operations by Germany, Turkey and other Nato members. There is also an unspoken reason for French reluctance to hand over the campaign to Nato: Mr Sarkozy hopes to wring all the domestic political advantage he can from prolonging France's leading role in the Libyan operations.

The British Government too was last night involved in a round of frantic diplomatic activity to patch together a new coalition to take over policing the Libyan no-fly zone, as David Cameron spent much of the afternoon in talks with the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, in an attempt to persuade the Kingdom to provide symbolic financial support. Apart from Qatar, no Arab state has committed military forces to the no-fly zone but British government sources said they were hopeful that other Middle Eastern countries – in particular the United Arab Emirates – would be prepared to provide support to operations even in a minor way.

"What we are looking at essentially is a Nato-plus coalition rather like we have with Isaf in Afghanistan," one British official said.