



## Into the unknown

**The coalition has begun its self-appointed task. But what is the aim, and what is the endgame?**

**E**VEN as French warplanes set off on March 19th, under a United Nations mandate, to stop Muammar Qaddafi's tanks and artillery reaching the Libyan rebel stronghold of Benghazi, it was clear that the hastily assembled "coalition of the willing" would have to make it up as it went along. The pace of events on the ground had left little time for reflection.

Security Council Resolution 1973, passed less than 48 hours earlier with Russia, China, Brazil, India and Germany abstaining, was a triumph for French and British diplomacy. France's president, Nicolas Sarkozy, had worked energetically to persuade Arab countries to make an appeal through the usually fairly useless Arab League for the UN to come to the aid of Libyan civilians. David Cameron, Britain's prime minister, had done his part by nudging the Americans to overcome their reservations about military intervention. Remarkably the resolution, which was co-sponsored by Lebanon, gave the allies an almost free hand, short of a full-scale invasion and occupation, to use "all necessary measures" to protect civilians from Colonel Qaddafi's advancing forces.

Yet those words have led to some confusion, among both allies and rebels, about what could or should be done. There has been wrangling, too, over who should lead the operation when the Americans

carry out their pledge, supposedly within the next few days, to withdraw to a merely supportive role.

It already looks as if establishing the no-fly zone was the easy part. The first barrage of nearly 120 Tomahawk cruise missiles from American warships and a British submarine, which struck 20 command-and-control sites, severely damaged the regime's ability to operate its air-defence system. Further salvos of cruise missiles and attacks by British, American and French aircraft over the next few nights appear to have finished the job, although Colonel Qaddafi may have saved some of his radar simply by turning it off.

By March 22nd a no-fly zone covered most of the rebel-held eastern coastal region. Combat patrols were being flown by aircraft from countries including Canada, Spain, Denmark, Italy and Belgium. Planes from Qatar were expected by March 27th. Over the next few days the aim is to extend the zone eastwards until it covers the whole of the coast to the capital, Tripoli. A *de facto* maritime exclusion zone has also been imposed, preventing Colonel Qaddafi from either resupplying his forces or shelling rebel-held cities from the sea.

How useful the no-fly zone will be in halting the regime's counter-offensive is debatable. Colonel Qaddafi may have had fewer than 40 operational combat aircraft

at most, and has many fewer now; but his fleet of attack helicopters (also vulnerable to "all necessary measures") has provided close support for ground troops, which at times has given him a critical advantage.

In some ways, the no-fly zone is as much a diplomatic as a military tool—a way of binding together a visibly fragile 14-nation alliance. But as the drafters of the resolution realised, it was never going to be enough on its own to prevent Colonel Qaddafi from killing his people.

Even without their combat aircraft and helicopter gunships, Colonel Qaddafi's paramilitaries are proving too well-trained and well-equipped for the motley rebel forces to withstand on their own. The spectacularly destructive results of the first French attack on the loyalist forces descending on Benghazi may have led the rebels to think that their fighting would be done for them, and that their enemies would quickly crumble. But it had its effect because Colonel Qaddafi's men, in their desperate attempt to reach Benghazi before the allies could get their act together, had allowed their supply lines to become dangerously overstretched, leaving tanks, transporters and rocket launchers strung out as sitting ducks along the desert road.

Benghazi and other rebel towns in the far east of the country, such as Tobruk, are now relatively secure from any attempt by ••

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- the regime to recapture them—a huge change from only a few days ago. But the picture in towns already controlled by Colonel Qaddafi's forces is less clear-cut. The rebels' attempt on March **21st** to relieve the strategic crossroads town of Ajdabiya, **145km (90 miles)** south-west of Benghazi, showed what they are up against and the limits of their military capability.

Emboldened by the coalition's demand that the regime should pull back from Ajdabiya, which was retaken by government forces last week, the rebels hoped that air attacks would do the same job for them as they had outside Benghazi. When jets were heard overhead, followed by big explosions, a few hundred rebels, toting a variety of light weapons from pick-up trucks, charged forward. But as shells and rockets began raining down on them they fled as quickly as they had come. Without discipline or training, adequate communications or a unified command structure, they are no match for Colonel Qaddafi's men.

Repulsing government forces from Ajdabiya, which controls the water supply to Benghazi, is a key objective for the coalition and the rebels. Coalition aircraft began launching strikes on the loyalist forces on March **22nd**, but they have so far proved hard to dislodge.

The situation in Libya's third-largest city, Misrata, only **130 miles** east of Tripoli and with a population of more than half a million, appeared even more desperate. After more than a week of heavy fighting in which well over **100** people are said to have died, the government announced on March **21st** that it was in full control of the town. That now looks premature. Loyalist tanks and artillery that had been sporadically bombarding the city for several weeks were silenced (at least temporarily) after pinpoint air strikes on the **23rd**. According to reports from within Misrata, many of the tanks were destroyed and many of Colonel Qaddafi's men were seen fleeing. Snipers, however, continued their deadly work in the centre and around the main hospital.

In Tripoli, despite the nightly attacks on the regime's command-and-control centres, there is not much sign of the government losing its grip. The regular pro-Qaddafi demonstrations do not accurately reflect feeling within the capital, but there is no way of knowing how strong opposition to the colonel may be.

A further complication for the coalition is the predictable exploitation of "human shields" (apparently, mostly volunteers) to protect high-value government targets. On March **21st** an **R A F** Tornado aborted its mission close to Tripoli after it was warned that civilians, including some foreign journalists, were close to its target.

The strikes on Tripoli also raised the question of whether trying to kill Colonel Qaddafi himself was consistent with the



terms of the Security Council resolution. The legal advice appears ambiguous. "Regime change" is not an allied goal, even though nobody believes that a peaceful, democratic Libya is possible while the colonel is around. On the other hand, if it is clear (as it surely is) that Colonel Qaddafi has given orders that have resulted in the butchering of Libyan civilians, he is indeed a legitimate target. This seems to be the position of the British government, which on March **21st** was quick to slap down the chief of the defence staff, Sir David Richards, who had grumpily told a **B B C** journalist that going after Colonel Qaddafi was "absolutely...not allowed".

### Who leads?

All this means that the coalition urgently needs to work out what its strategic objectives are and what it is prepared to do to achieve them. But before that, it must sort out who is going to lead it.

The Americans were willing to accept that role in the first phase of the campaign because of the range of assets (from the opening cruise-missile barrage, to electronic jamming, intelligence-gathering, mission co-ordination and fuel supply) that only they could bring to the speedy establishment of the no-fly zone. But in line with the new humility and commitment to multilateralism that Barack Obama preaches, they were adamant that they would then hand over to somebody else.

That did not, however, mean falling in with Mr Sarkozy's preference for a Franco-British command. Mr Sarkozy argued from the start that he did not want the operation led by **N A T O**, because **N A T O** is seen in the Arab world as a tool of American power, and Arab support for the coalition is already weak. The Americans and the Brit-

ish, however, were reluctant to sideline **N A T O**. The result was a fudge agreed late on March **22nd**. Mr Sarkozy and Mr Obama agreed that **N A T O** would assume day-to-day military command of the no-fly zone under Admiral James Stavrides, the American supreme allied commander in Europe; but that, reflecting some of **N A T O**'s own divisions, particularly the ambivalence of Turkey and Germany, political control would lie with the members of the coalition rather than with the North Atlantic Council, the main decision-making body of the alliance. However, late on March **23rd** Turkey's opposition to coalition ground attacks stalled the signing of the compromise.

Obstructions of this sort make it all the harder to settle other essential matters swiftly. The first is to devise a realistic set of strategic goals. One may already have been achieved. With no more than about **10,000** troops available and with any advance across the desert acutely exposed to coalition air strikes, Colonel Qaddafi has almost certainly lost his chance to reimpose his authority in the east.

However, there have been doubts about how far attacks from the air could help the civilians who are within Colonel Qaddafi's reach. The position of the government forces besieging Ajdabiya looked precarious after air attacks on March **22nd**, and they were said to be running out of ammunition. But the big test is bringing help to Misrata. Admiral Samuel Locklear, a coalition commander, said that all options were being considered.

Misrata is important not just for humanitarian reasons. If it cannot be saved, or the cost of doing so is deemed too high, the coalition would be sending a signal that for now there is not much it can do to

- prevent Colonel Qaddafi consolidating his position in the western half of the country. But if coalition air strikes are able to take out government heavy weaponry in urban areas without significant risk to civilians, as appears to be happening in Misrata, the pessimists may be confounded.

What happens to Misrata, in other words, could define the extent of the coalition's objectives, at least in the short term. It must decide whether there is any realistic prospect of the rebels taking on Colonel Qaddafi's forces and power structure in the west. The rebels themselves are reported to be divided between those who believe that the regime can be toppled with one more push, as long as they are supported by coalition air power, and those who believe that a temporary stalemate makes more sense. During such a stalemate, the rebels' national council in Benghazi could turn itself into a government-in-waiting capable of speaking with one voice, and much-needed military capabilities could be developed.

There may also be some tension within the coalition between those keen to attempt a speedy resolution and those who are resigned to a lengthier engagement. Patience is still likely to be the better bet, unless the regime collapses from within.

Misrata makes that outcome just a bit more likely. Colonel Qaddafi's troops and supporters are rapidly learning just how devastatingly effective western air power can be. But without substantial defections from the loyalist army, the rebels cannot hope to become a cohesive military force unless they receive weapons and training from outside, which would seem to be in breach of the UN arms embargo.

A short-term partition of Libya might be bearable, but a long-term one raises the prospect of an arms race, rapid economic decline and Colonel Qaddafi resuming his sponsorship of international terrorism. Al-

geria, which disavows the Arab League declaration, might start rearming the colonel across his western border.

Two further pressing issues for the coalition will be the enforcement of sanctions against the regime and the question of whether the rebels can gain access to Libya's (diminished) oil revenues. The biggest refinery, at Ras Lanuf, lies in what is likely to be the rebels' area of control; so too do many of the oilfields. On the other hand, if reports that the colonel has \$6.4 billion-worth of gold stashed away in the country's central bank in Tripoli are true, he has a potential advantage in any war of

attrition. If he can liquidate this hoard into cash, arms and food, his chances of clinging on indefinitely will be boosted.

Given the range of uncertainties, the question of targeting Colonel Qaddafi himself becomes more relevant. Without him, it is hard to see the regime surviving for more than a few weeks. The coalition will not change its declared position that killing the Libyan war leader is not on its list of objectives. But were it somehow to happen, few would complain.

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