

### Libya Conflict: Weekly Recap

By Michael Whittaker

August 4, 2011

#### International Resolve

The United Kingdom and France reiterated their support for continued participation in the Libya conflict. UK Defense Minister Liam Fox stated that Britain will take part in the bombing campaign “as long as is required”, and Foreign Secretary William Hague noted the conflict was “something you follow through in the real world.” ( [Reuters](#), [PressTV](#)) French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet pledged to continue the aerial bombardment of Libya as France’s Rafale fighter jets relocate to a NATO airbase in Sicily, following the departure of the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* to France. ( [Reuters](#)) The comments come as Norway concluded its involvement in the air war, the first of the eight NATO members participating in the airstrikes to do so. Norway’s contribution of four F-16 fighters ended on August 1, though NATO officials stated the recent arrival of four British Tornado jets would allow the pace of air operations to continue unaffected. ( [AFP](#))

Russia renewed calls for negotiations in Libya, as a senior Russian diplomat described the current fighting as a “dead end” and stated that only renewed dialogue and political solutions could bring peace to the country. ( [AFP](#)) China’s assistant foreign minister reinforced this viewpoint, urging the United Nations to assume a greater role in facilitating mediations. ( [Xinhua](#)) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, meanwhile, read a letter from Qaddafi on Venezuelan national television and offered his continued support of the Qaddafi regime. ( [WP](#)) Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Bahrain Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa also sent congratulatory messages to Qaddafi for the start of Ramadan, and South Africa’s ambassador to the UN criticized Western governments for demanding that Qaddafi step down. ( [Reuters](#), [BBC](#))

#### Mired in Mystery

Uncertainty continues to surround the death of rebel military leader Abdel Fatah Younis, killed last week in an ambush by unknown assailants. Several groups have been accused of carrying out the assassination. Rebel Oil and Finance Minister Ali Tarhouni stated the Abu Obeida Al-Jarah Brigade was responsible; the little-known brigade is supposedly responsible for internal security. ( [WSJ](#)) Opposition forces blamed the attack on an alleged “fifth column” of Qaddafi loyalists operating among their ranks, though it is unclear if the perpetrators are actually regime loyalists or a rebel unit that held a vendetta against Younis. This group of fighters was in possession of a hit list of opposition leaders, including Younis, though there is no clear evidence they were behind the killing. ( [AFP](#)) The Qaddafi regime blamed al-Qaeda for the attack while also claiming the Union of Revolutionary Forces and the Feb 17 Brigade (both opposition units) were involved in the killing. ( [BBC](#), [Reuters](#))

Though Younis’ relatives pledged their allegiance to National Transitional Council (NTC) leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil, Younis’ family has become increasingly critical of the NTC’s slow investigation into the attack. One of Younis’ sons warned that emotions are running high among the Obedi tribe and cautioned of “consequences” for the NTC if investigation delays continue. ( [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#)) Western officials stated their support for the rebels remains unaffected by the killing, though political analysts have offered a more skeptical view of potential fractures within the rebellion’s ranks. ( [AP](#)) A Qaddafi spokesman stated the killing was an indication of the opposition forces’ inability to rule Libya. ( [BBC](#))

### Qaddafi's Forces Hold Firm

Rebel forces continued their offensive in the Nafusa Mountains, seizing the towns of Jawsh and Ghazaya while placing Tiji under siege on July 30. A regime counterattack retook Jawsh on August 1, however, and the opposition forces have been unable to advance further into Tiji. ([AJE](#), [Reuters](#)) Rebel fighters are reportedly running low on ammunition outside Tiji and have expressed their frustration at the lack of NATO airstrikes in the region; rivalries among rebel commanders have also arisen as supplies dwindle during the siege. ([Reuters](#), [Reuters](#)) In western Libya, Zlitan faced heavy fighting as the rebels attempted to advance into the city on July 30. Opposition forces stated they had reached the city center, though a regime counterattack killed seven rebels and wounded at least 45. ([BBC](#), [Reuters](#)) Despite rebel claims of defeating the regime strike, it is unclear which side currently controls Zlitan.

As the holy month of Ramadan begins, opposition fighters have pledged they will “fight more, not less.” ([WP](#)) Other rebels have been more pessimistic in tone, dismayed by the lack of Western funding and the continued resistance of Qaddafi loyalist troops. ([LAT](#)) NATO marked the start of Ramadan with airstrikes on a dozen targets, primarily destroying ammunition depots and missile sites. Coalition aircraft also targeted Libya’s television infrastructure, though Libyan state television was still on-air after the bombings. ([BBC](#)) A NATO spokesman indicated that a Ramadan truce with Qaddafi was unlikely, as regime forces would use any ceasefire as an opportunity to rearm and regroup. ([Reuters](#), [RTT](#)) Saif al-Islam Qaddafi pledged to continue the war regardless of NATO’s stance, though the regime defense minister offered a general pardon and amnesty to any rebels that left the movement and promised loyalty to Qaddafi. ([WP](#))

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August 12, 2011

### Cleaning House

National Transitional Council (NTC) Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil announced the dismissal of the Council’s 14-member executive board on August 9. NTC officials indicated the board’s dissolution was related to the death of rebel military chief of staff General Abdul Fattah Younis, who was assassinated on July 28 by unknown assailants. ([CNN](#)) No arrests have been made following Younis’ killing, and members of Younis’ family and the influential Obeidi tribe have strongly condemned the NTC for its as-yet inconclusive investigation of the attack. ([Globe & Mail](#)) Rebel units such as the February 17 Martyrs Brigade and the Abu Obeida al-Jarrah Brigade have been accused of the killing, but no firm evidence has emerged to implicate a specific faction. ([Reuters](#)) NTC officials stated that “administrative errors” within the executive board contributed to Younis’ death, with several unidentified board members placed under investigation. Prior to the board’s dismissal, a prominent group of rebel judges and lawyers also criticized individual members of the board for their role in Younis’ death. This group, known as the Coalition for the Revolution of the 17th of February, called for the resignation of vice chairman Ali Essawi, rebel judge Jomaa al-Jazwi al-Obeidy, defense minister Jalal al-Digheily and Union of Revolutionary Forces coordinator Fawzi Bukatef. An NTC spokesman stated external pressure was not a factor in the reorganization. ([Globe & Mail](#), [NYT](#))

NTC officials reported new government ministers would be appointed as soon as possible. Former Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril has been tasked with assembling the new board, and some previous members may be retained when the board reconvenes. ([AJE](#)) Western governments have been cautiously supportive of the NTC reshuffling; the United States praised the NTC for “taking a hard look at itself” as a “democratic and transparent” government, while France urged the NTC to rapidly reform its leadership body. ([WP](#), [KUNA](#)) Chairman Jalil and deputy head Abdul Hafez Ghoga also stated plans to reorganize the structure of the rebel military. Individual volunteer brigades have been slated for disbandment and will be incorporated into the official rebel army. This includes the Union of Revolutionary Forces, a large umbrella organization comprised of numerous fighters and ex-military officers, though the Union has resisted calls to merge into the primary rebel force. ([Globe & Mail](#), [WP](#))

### August Airstrikes

NATO aircraft conducted numerous strikes against regime military forces and installations throughout the week. Airstrikes destroyed three dozen vehicles in the city of Brega and also knocked out several military stations and radar sites in Zlitan. ([NATO](#), [NATO](#)) British Apache helicopters destroyed or damaged sixteen regime armored vehicles at al-Watayah near the Tunisian border, and jet fighters targeted command and control centers in Tiji and Bir al-Ghanam. ([BBC](#), [NATO](#))

Despite reports of being killed by a NATO airstrike last week, Qaddafi’s youngest son Khamis Qaddafi appeared on Libyan state television in Tripoli visiting hospitalized civilians reportedly wounded by a NATO attack. ([WP](#)) Khamis is the commander of the 32nd Brigade, an elite paramilitary unit that has been engaged against rebel forces since the outset of the conflict. NATO was also criticized for bombing Libyan state broadcasting facilities on July 30. UNESCO condemned the operation as an act of violence against media personnel, though NATO justified the strike to prevent Libyan television from inciting violence against civilians. ([UN](#), [AP](#))

### Staying Afloat

Rebel forces seized the settlement of Bir al-Ghanam on August 6, a small crossroads village 50 miles southwest of Tripoli. Field commanders indicated their next objective was to proceed to Zawiyah, a coastal town west of Tripoli. ([Reuters](#)) Opposition fighters have also reportedly retaken part of the town of Brega, but regime forces still control the city’s petrochemical facility to the southwest. ([Reuters](#), [Reuters](#)) Tunisian police seized five truckloads of fuel destined for regime forces in Libya, and Tunisian officials noted they would increase interceptions of illegal oil smuggling. A Qaddafi spokesman stated Tripoli has been facing fuel shortages, with another official estimating most residents only receive four hours of power per day. ([Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

On the diplomatic front, rebel forces have continued their efforts to secure weapons and ammunition from foreign donors. A Qatari plane reportedly offloaded six truckloads of munitions in Misrata on August 6, and NTC officials are engaged in talks with Turkey to provide additional weaponry to resistance fighters. ([Reuters](#), [UPI](#)) Opposition diplomats in London reopened the Libyan embassy on Tuesday under the NTC flag, and British officials stated more countries may soon unfreeze Libyan financial assets for the NTC to use. ([Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

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#### Libyan Rebels Advance

Opposition forces went on the offensive this week, assaulting several key regime towns. Rebels attacked Zawiyah and Gharyan on August 13, both of which are important gateways to Tripoli; Zawiyah is located 30 miles west of the capital and Gharyan is 50 miles to the south. ([VOA](#)) After a rapid advance north from the Nafusa Mountains, the rebels seized most of Zawiyah following several days of fighting and were able to fend off a regime counterattack on August 15. ([CNN](#), [CTV](#)) Loyalist forces abandoned the city's oil refinery on August 18, and rebel fighters have only encountered sporadic resistance since. ([NYT](#)) Opposition forces faced less resistance in Gharyan, and the town was reported clear of loyalist forces by August 18. ([Reuters](#)) Zawiyah serves as vital route for Tripoli to receive supplies from Tunisia, while Gharyan connects the capital to strongholds in the southern Libyan and links Tripoli to Chad and Niger. If the rebels are able to hold these cities in the face of regime counterattacks, Tripoli could become entirely isolated from outside aid.

Rebel fighters continued advancing westward from Zawiyah, seizing several towns along the coastal highway that links Tripoli to Tunisia. Rebel commanders have stated the towns of Surman, Sabratha and Zuwarah are under opposition control, though the claims have yet to be independently verified. ([Globe & Mail](#)) Opposition forces in Misrata proceeded southward and claimed to have taken the town of Tawarga, and fighters stated their intent to push west towards the town of Bani Walid and cut off Tripoli from yet another supply route. ([Bloomberg](#)) In eastern Libya, the rebels and loyalist remain locked in heavy fighting for the town of Brega. At least 18 rebels have been killed and 74 wounded during the past several days, and loyalist forces remain entrenched near the city's oil refinery and port terminal. ([CBS](#))

#### Discussions and Denials

Conflicting reports have emerged from Tunisia this week concerning potential peace talks between regime and opposition leaders. A UN special envoy reported meeting separately with loyalist and rebel officials on August 16, and former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin also made a "private trip" to Tunisia for discussions with the two groups. ([BBC](#), [Reuters](#)) Regime spokesmen have claimed that contact has been made in recent days to find a political solution to the conflict, though National Transitional Council officials have denied that any negotiations have occurred. ([AFP](#))

In addition to announcing peace talks, Libyan Prime Minister Baghdadi Mahmudi called for an immediate ceasefire in Libya on August 18. ([AFP](#)) The Qaddafi government has called for ceasefires on several previous occasions, only for loyalist forces to continue attacking rebel positions. ([AJC](#)) The newly-proposed peace talks would not discuss Qaddafi's fate, according to regime officials, a condition which has been rejected by opposition forces. An unnamed Libyan military officer indicated that Qaddafi was prepared to leave the country and delegate authority to his Minister of Justice, though NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil estimated that, "Qaddafi will not go quietly." ([Al Bawaba](#), [AFP](#))

### Looking Forward

Though the opposition has seized the momentum from the regime's forces, capturing Tripoli remains a major obstacle for the rebel fighters. While residents of other Libyan towns have risen up against the regime, many of Tripoli's citizens are supportive of Qaddafi and may take up arms to oppose the rebels.

( [Reuters](#) ) Morale remains high among Tripoli's citizens and security forces, and Qaddafi's paramilitary units are still better trained and equipped than opposition fighters. ( [BBC](#), [Globe & Mail](#) ) If rebel forces do march on Tripoli, widespread violence and destruction are expected during intense urban warfare. ( [CSM](#) ) NTC Chairman Mustafa Jalil warned of a "veritable bloodbath" if the rebels assault the capital, though Jalil still expressed his hope of securing Tripoli by the end of Ramadan. ( [AFP](#) ) A former Libyan army colonel cautioned that Qaddafi may fire more Scud missiles as the rebels advance, and fears remain that the regime may also deploy chemical weapons. ( [Washington Times](#), [Telegraph](#) )

From an international standpoint, NATO is approaching its September 27 deadline to conclude operations in Libya. Several coalition members are likely to extend their military commitments to the operation. Denmark has already pledged its six F-16 fighters for three additional months, and Britain and France have stated their intention to continue air operations until Qaddafi falls. ( [Defence Web](#), [Reuters](#) ) Yet other countries such as Canada and Italy are facing increased domestic pressure to withdraw from the NATO effort, potentially reducing the available combat strength of the coalition during a critical time for the rebellion. ( [Star](#), [VOA](#) ) NATO ambassadors are scheduled to meet on Aug. 31 to discuss a 90-day extension for the mission. ( [Reuters](#) )

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### Assault on Tripoli

Over the past weekend, six months of fighting culminated with a concerted rebel charge on Tripoli, Libya's capital. Fighting in Tripoli began on August 20, when several restive neighborhoods rose up against the Qaddafi regime as a prelude to the rebel attack. ( [Guardian](#) ) Opposition forces quickly advanced on the city from the west and south, coordinating their movements under the cover of NATO airstrikes. The advance showcased greater cooperation between rebel commanders and coalition forces; rebel fighters paused to allow NATO jets to clear their route, while Western Special Forces served as forward air controllers and directed the coalition aircraft towards regime military targets. ( [Guardian](#) ) The opposition seized the base of the elite Khamis Brigade just outside the capital on August 21, though the paramilitary unit was not present within the city. Rebels reached Tripoli's Green Square just after midnight on August 22, celebrating briefly before continuing to spread throughout the rest of the city. ( [Guardian](#) ) Resistance has not been as heavy within the capital as previously expected, with a US intelligence official noting, "for the most part, the Libyan regime forces seem to have just not engaged." ( [WP](#) )

The rapid advance on Tripoli resulted from the combined effort of the rebel offensive, NATO planning, and intelligence sharing. CIA operatives disclosed information on Qaddafi's disintegrating command structures, and U.S. intelligence officials provided imagery analysis that revealed the location of regime forces as the rebels progressed to the capital. British, French, and Qatari Special Forces assisted the rebels in crafting a pincer movement towards Tripoli, urging opposition units to seize key staging grounds on the road to the capital: the town of Gharyan served as a route to the city from the south and Zawiyah provided a key rallying point from the west. ( [WP](#), [Guardian](#), [LA Times](#) ) The coordinated rebel attack from both directions encircled Tripoli, driving the loyalist defenders back and allowing opposition fighters to enter the city.

### Loose Ends

Although opposition fighters have steadily progressed through Tripoli, they have been unable to locate and capture Qaddafi. Rebel forces stormed Qaddafi's fortified Bab al-Aziziyah compound on August 23, driving off regime soldiers after several days of fighting. The rebels proceeded to search the complex and explore its underground tunnels, but discovered that the Libyan ruler had vacated the premises. ( [NPR](#) ) Qaddafi subsequently released a series of audio tapes, stating his departure from Bab al-Aziziyah was a "tactical move" and promising to continue fighting against the rebels. ( [BBC](#) ) Despite assertions that the rebels had arrested three of Qaddafi's sons – Saif, Saadi and Mohammad – recent events disproved their claims. Saif later appeared among supporters at the Rixos Hotel, Saadi reportedly emailed CNN to request a ceasefire deal, and Mohammad apparently escaped house arrest with the aid of loyalist forces. ( [Telegraph](#), [Reuters](#) ) Khamis and Muatassim Qaddafi, both commanders of paramilitary brigades, are also missing. ( [AP](#) )

Loyalist forces still control of several Libyan strongholds, including Qaddafi's home city of Sirte and the desert town of Sabha. Situated on the coastal road between Tripoli and Benghazi, Sirte's heavily armed garrison has remained fiercely loyal to Qaddafi throughout the conflict. ( [WP](#) ) National Transitional Council officials have stated their concern that assaulting Sirte may be more difficult than taking Tripoli. They have initiated talks with Sirte tribal leaders to surrender the city, but the peace overtures have been unsuccessful. ( [BBC](#) ) Sabah, located 400 miles south of Tripoli, has also resisted uprisings and opposition attacks. Rebel instigators failed in their attempt to launch a revolt in Sabah, and regime forces are currently defending the town against a rebel assault. ( [Economist](#), [Reuters](#) ) The remaining loyalist soldiers have been consolidating their positions within Sirte and Sabah, and opposition commanders have speculated that Qaddafi may attempt to flee to these last remaining redoubts. ( [Channel 4](#) )

### The Long Road Ahead

With the Qaddafi regime collapsing, the future stability of Libya is far from certain. The NTC is poised to assume political leadership of the Libyan government, but it is unclear whether all rebel groups will coalesce under the NTC banner as no clear chain of command exists among the opposition factions. ( [AP](#) ) The NTC itself is a tenuous combination of mixed interests, as the Council is comprised of Libyan exiles, Islamist fighters, secular politicians, and former regime officials. ( [BBC](#) ) The lack of an NTC presence in Tripoli and the divisions between rebel groups could compromise the formation of a new government, and dissent among Libya's major tribes could pose a challenge for Libyan unity as well.

( [Guardian](#)) Within Tripoli, rebel officials have voiced concern over retribution violence against Qaddafi supporters. NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil has issued warnings for rebel commanders to restrain their units, threatening to resign if revenge killings begin proliferating within the city. ( [McClatchy](#)) Incorporating former loyalists into a new government will be critical for securing Libyan stability. Recognizing this, NTC officials have pledged to protect and include ex-regime personnel.

Once the Qaddafi regime falls, the NTC must address the political, economic, and structural reconstruction of Libya. The conflict has severely damaged the country's infrastructure and oil facilities. While initial oil production may be restarted within three months, experts indicate that the majority of the fuel will be needed domestically. ( [AFP](#)) Analysts have estimated large-scale exports may not resume for 18 to 36 months as the Libyan government must carry out repairs, negotiate new contracts, and facilitate the return of foreign workers. ( [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [Reuters](#)) Battle-scarred cities such as Tripoli and Misrata will require substantial rebuilding, and rebel officials will need to secure the delivery of basic services across Libya.