

Libya's opposition calls for a ceasefire

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Since the intervention in Libya has neither resulted in the removal of Gaddafi, or an end to the fighting - an immediate ceasefire should be top of everyone's agenda, despite what complications the negotiations would entail, to bring an end to the continuing bloodshed.

The UN Security Council resolution aimed at protecting civilians in Libya started with the call for "the immediate establishment of a ceasefire". But for the first two weeks the only action taken by the powerful countries that orchestrated the UN response was to escalate military engagement - a no-fly zone, air strikes, "all necessary means".

The US and other western countries continued calling openly for regime change. Some African Union heads of state tried to go to Libya to begin negotiations, but were denied entry to the country, apparently in response to South Africa's vote supporting the UN resolution. A ceasefire didn't seem to be at the top of anyone's agenda.

But now the Libyan opposition has publicly called for a ceasefire. And despite their US and European backers' insistence, and the clear preference of at least part of the resistance for regime change, they outlined terms that fall well short of the regime's collapse. The head of the Benghazi-based Interim Governing Council, Mustafa Abd Jalil, following a meeting with the UN's special envoy to Libya, offered Gaddafi an immediate ceasefire if "the forces that are besieging the cities withdraw," and if "our brothers in the western cities have freedom of expression".

Change of terrain

The Gaddafi regime's initial military attack on the democratic protesters followed by the decision of the opposition to take up arms itself, has largely transformed the Libyan conflict from a civilian uprising that was part of the Arab Spring, into a civil war.

So far, even the combination of massive US-NATO air strikes, CIA agents on the ground coordinating with the opposition, Obama's authorisation to arm the rebels, and the defection of Moussa Koussa and other key Qaddafi aides, has not been sufficient to defeat the regime's military. The two sides continue to battle for control of key cities along Libya's entire coastal strip. Claiming they simply "hoped" Gaddafi's regime would crumble from within, US, European and other international actors had staked out positions that essentially ruled out negotiations while the longtime Libyan leader remained in power. The opposition's sudden call for a ceasefire has significantly changed the terrain.

Clearly this is the moment for a rapid international move towards new negotiations aimed at

establishing the immediate ceasefire. The opposition's shift may reflect their growing realisation that even the massive US-NATO attacks against the regime and the possibility of CIA arms and training will not ensure - let alone consolidate - a real victory over the far better-armed and better-trained forces of Gaddafi's military.

This new position may also reflect a growing uncertainty as to whether the vastly disparate components of the opposition - young democratically-oriented professionals, unemployed workers, a range of Islamists, defecting regime soldiers, newly returned Libyan CIA assets and more - can unify enough to continue fighting. They also may be watching the rapidly disintegrating international support for the western coalition fighting on their side of the civil war, and judging that they dare not rely too much on their current allies.

Finally, the opposition may have recognized the increasing danger to civilians across Libya posed by the escalating fighting. Even NATO is warning its erstwhile partners, the Libyan opposition, against attacking civilians.

Deal with the devil?

How would a ceasefire come about? Clearly urgent negotiations are needed. There are outraged gasps of "Negotiate?! With Gaddafi?!" - mostly coming from US and European officials. They need to be answered with the quick reminder that until about six weeks ago, that same Muammar Gaddafi was their guy.

They need to be reminded that in 2003, US and European diplomats negotiated quite nicely with their Libyan counterparts, and, in just about a year reached an agreement in which Gaddafi surrendered his nascent nuclear weapons program and paid huge compensation claims to victims of Libyan terrorist attacks. The US meanwhile removed Libya from its "anti-terror" blacklist and ended sanctions, while European governments rushed to embrace the Libyan dictator and European oil companies flooded Libya with new oil contracts. And they need to be reminded that Gaddafi's repression was well known back then too. So yes, negotiations are possible - and urgent.

A ceasefire will certainly be difficult to establish - and it will be even more difficult to maintain. One possibility would be to empower key regional forces to monitor and maintain the ceasefire. If both the African Union and the Arab League were involved, their perceived pro-Gaddafi and pro-opposition biases, respectively, would cancel each other out and allow a greater chance of an impartial peacekeeping role.

If Libya's newly-democratising neighbours, Egypt and Tunisia, were to play a central role, their legitimacy and interest in maintaining stability would lend important credibility to the effort. Even if those two countries, both struggling to create post-dictator governance, are unable to provide major military or police forces, symbolic command from Cairo and Tunis would still be important. And certainly funding for such a ceasefire monitoring force should come from those outside countries who so quickly managed to find ready cash to pay for F-15s, Tomahawk missiles, Mirage fighters, etc.

Draw-backs

Certainly there are dangers. A ceasefire in place, however urgently needed, unfortunately implies at least a temporary division of Libya. The opposition's proposal would lead to a division of the country into separate zones, with the government and military having different levels of control in each.

In the east, the opposition has established its capital in Benghazi and controls the territory between Benghazi and the Egyptian border. The opposition's offer would require the regime to withdraw its troops from the cities where the fighting has been fiercest, but just which cities are we talking about? Only those identified as "eastern Libya," which usually means east of Sirte, Gaddafi's historic stronghold halfway between Benghazi and Tripoli? If so, what about Misurata, much closer to Tripoli and actually west of Sirte, where heavy fighting has gone on too? And who would govern in those cities, the now-demilitarized remnants of the regime, or the still-inchoate Libyan opposition?

In the west, meantime, the opposition is not demanding that the regime's troops withdraw, let alone that Gaddafi step down or that his regime be dismantled. The only condition is for guarantees of free speech for people living in "the western cities".

Again, which cities are we talking about? Misurata is certainly one of Libya's "western cities," but it has also seen some of the most intense fighting between the regime's troops and opposition supporters. All those issues of territorial control and division will need to be resolved - and unless the Gaddafi regime is weaker than it appears, that will not be easy. A ceasefire alone does not answer all those critical questions.

It should mean an end to US claims that somehow the UN resolutions' unequivocal demand for a complete arms embargo does not apply to weapons sent to strengthen the opposition - but the US may continue that claim and it will have to be challenged. A ceasefire does not provide for the kind of real accountability so desperately needed to hold not only Gaddafi but other dictators across the region, those already overthrown and those still holding on to power, to account for their human rights violations and other crimes.

The situation in Libya has been referred to the International Criminal Court, where prosecutors are already investigating possible violations. A ceasefire should not end those investigations, but the timing of accountability efforts always has to take into consideration the requirements of ending bloodshed.

So yes, a ceasefire in place raises all kinds of new complications. But it allows the possibility of negotiating those complicated issues without more people dying. The US and some of the Europeans claim they are bombing Libya at the request of the Libyan opposition.

Now that that same Libyan opposition is requesting a ceasefire, the western coalition needs to fulfil their request immediately and unilaterally. And negotiations towards a full immediate ceasefire in Libya should now be at the top of every agenda.

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P.S.

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