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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Deeper and deeper into Libya

By James Kirkup

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Skimming fast and low over the ground, bristling with missiles and heavy with armour, the Army's Apache AH64 attack helicopters are British might incarnate, a muscular show of power and self-assurance from a country that remains (just) in the global premier league of military players.

Yet their presence over western [Libya](#) this weekend is also a tacit sign of British failure, the failure of 11 weeks of aerial bombardment to remove Col Muammar Gaddafi from power.

Deploying the Apaches is final proof of something that all but the most partisan of RAF devotees have long conceded: you can start a war from 30,000 feet, but you can only win it on the ground. "Boots on the ground" may have been ruled out, but Britain's military operation is undeniably moving closer to Libyan soil.

Ministers privately hope that the helicopters will provide the final, risky heave required for the Gaddafi regime to crumble, either persuading the dictator to quit and run, or persuading his henchmen, already said to be panicking, that they must remove him to save their own skins.

Even more fervently, they pray that Gaddafi's forces do not manage the one lucky strike that brings down an Apache and summons up the ghost of America's agonising "Black Hawk Down" experience in Somalia.

Such are the questions that hang over Britain's war in western Libya, now well into its third month.

Yet at the other end of the desert road along the Libyan coast, there is little to suggest a nation at war, and still less to suggest that Gaddafi retains much authority.

Benghazi, Libya's second city and the cradle of its revolution, is covered in anti-Gaddafi graffiti and posters. "Gaddafi – game over" and "Gaddafi to the devil" are common sentiments. There are jibes that the dictator is a thief, a murderer and even an agent of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service. All were put in place by people who are confident the man they insult will never be able to punish them for the insult.

Security in the city is such that William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, and Andrew Mitchell, the Development Secretary, were able to fly in over the weekend and tour Freedom Square and meet opposition activists and victims of the Gaddafi regime on a chaotic, good-natured walkabout.

The enthusiasm for change in Benghazi is palpable. Mr Hague and Mr Mitchell were mobbed by grateful Libyans on the dockside, and applauded at a brief press conference. In turn, they offered warm words about the progress the rebel authorities have made in restoring some semblance of normality to the city. The most visible sign of progress is the smartly uniformed and well-equipped police force (many of them former soldiers) who provide highly effective traffic management for the visiting dignitaries.

On the other side of the ledger, basic services are still struggling. A large modern hospital complex, opened last year, can operate only around 90 of its 1,200 beds, for want of staff and supplies. Most schools have not been open since the revolution began in February, and rubbish is piling up in the streets because the migrant workers who used to collect it have fled.

On the road to Benghazi airport, a ragged poster clings to a billboard. "No foreign intervention. Libyan people can do it alone," it declares proudly.

Yet the truth, widely accepted by both foreign and Libyan officials, is that they cannot.

The city is run by the Transitional National Council, a self-appointed coalition of former regime officials and opposition figures somehow managing to work together to offer an alternative to the regime. "There are people who were in jail and people who put them in jail," says one diplomat.

If Gaddafi's longevity is the principal worry for British ministers, the stability and capability of the TNC comes a very close second.

Because whenever the end comes for the dictator, a new set of dangers and opportunities, both for Libya and the West, will come to the fore.

The TNC, whose leaders include Western-educated technocrats, talks smoothly about an inclusive political process and an early move to hold free elections after Gaddafi is gone.

But just as Western commanders question the rebels' military ability – hence the deployment of Apaches – so Western governments doubt the rebel leaders' ability to organise that transition.

Mr Hague admitted that the rebels' plans for post-Gaddafi Libya are still only “embryonic”, urging them to do far more to prepare for the potentially chaotic and decisive hours that would follow regime change in Libya.

“They would have an extraordinary opportunity,” Mr Hague said, warning also: “That [it] would not last long.”

Having risked so much for the rebels, British ministers are not prepared to gamble on their ability. So Britain now has a significant mission of around 40 diplomats, development specialists and military advisers in Benghazi.

They include officials from the Department for International Development, who are urgently drawing up options on how to stop the country falling apart after Gaddafi. The Stabilisation Response Team will report to ministers as early as next week, giving a series of stark warnings about the risks that will come with the “inevitable power vacuum” in Tripoli.

At best, the TNC and other Libyans will manage to agree between themselves exactly how the country should be governed. At worst, the rebels will split and squabble, fighting among themselves and against remnants of the regime for power, territory and resources.

That risk is so real that international peacekeepers could be deployed to oversee a transition to elections and a new government: boots on the ground.

And some diplomats privately wonder if the least dangerous path for Libya would see Gaddafi replaced with more benign military rulers, as in neighbouring Egypt. Certainly, the next Libyan government seems certain to include members of the current one, notwithstanding Western promises that those responsible for human rights abuses should face international justice.

In Whitehall, the reconstruction phase will only add to the pressure on Andrew Mitchell, the development secretary, to show that his large and growing budget is being used for something urgently useful.

Aware of that pressure, Mr Mitchell used his visit to tell his team to speed up their planning. Col Gaddafi may well cling on for months more, but he could also be gone in days: plans have been ordered for all eventualities.

In the crudest political terms, Mr Mitchell's task is to ensure that what happens in Libya after Gaddafi is not compared to what happened in Iraq after Saddam Hussein.

David Cameron started his war in Libya promising MPs that “this is not Iraq”, and there are significant differences.

The Libyan intervention began with the explicit backing of the UN, the support of many Arab nations and a lot of the Libyan people. Ministers and officials alike insist that they have learnt from Iraq, hence the extensive work going into post-Gaddafi planning.

Yet there is one parallel that haunts those involved in Britain's Libyan effort. The UK is now actively involved in a military campaign aimed at toppling a long-standing Arab dictator who has built a state around himself. The worry is that without Gaddafi, there will be no Libyan state to speak of. Gaddafi took power in 1969 and arguably created modern Libya in his image. Without him, will civil servants stay in their posts, will policemen turn up to work, will the lights stay on?

The darkest fears about regime change are far worse. The US military has said it sees "flickers" of al-Qaeda activity in Libya, and weapons from the country are already known to have made their way to Islamist groups in Mali. A priority for British military planners is ensuring that whatever and whoever follows Gaddafi, Libya's stocks of chemical weapons components are secure.

Western intelligence agencies' information about Tripoli is "patchy," sources say. And that means our leaders are more or less in the dark about what will happen to Libya after Gaddafi.

But one senior British source is candid about the postwar challenge: "It won't be quick or clean. This is not a state where you can just remove one leader and put another one in his place. The institutions just aren't there. It will be a long and difficult process."

And who will bear the burden? Ministers talk of a United Nations process, about financial support from Arab states and the wider world. But few doubt that as the leaders of the military operation, Britain and France will be expected to play a major role in its aftermath.

As US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned George W Bush before the Iraq war, launching a military intervention is like visiting a china shop: "You break it, you bought it."

In other words, whenever Gaddafi's departure comes, David Cameron's first war will not be over any time soon.