

Summary
Reports of explosions and heavy gunfire in Tripoli on Aug. 20 indicate that rebel fighters may be beginning an attempt to lay siege on the Libyan capital with the aim of removing Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Based on the limited information available so far and the immense complications entailed in trying to seize a metropolis like Tripoli, however, it does not appear that the rebels are in a position to wage a final assault against Gadhafi.

Analysis
Rebel fighters based out of Libya's Nafusa Mountains appear to have made considerable progress over the past week in advancing toward Tripoli. After several days of fighting, the rebels seem to have gained the upper hand in the town of Zawiyah a key point along Gadhafi's supply line and the possession of which could enable the rebels to choke off supplies to Tripoli and now seem poised to begin an assault on the Libyan capital. Though Gadhafi appears to be on the defensive, the challenges of laying siege to and then taking a city defended by forces that have had a significant amount of time to dig in and prepare for an attack cannot be understated. If Gadhafi can retain the loyalty of his remaining troops, the rebels will have a difficult time seizing the city. Zawiyah is a crucial transit point used by Gadhafi's forces to smuggle fuel across a well-paved coastal road from the porous Tunisia-Libya border to Tripoli. The rebel occupation of Zawiyah, along with the towns of Sorman and Sabratha, has the potential to effectively cut Gadhafi's western supply line from Tunisia. It should be noted that while rebel forces have claimed to have taken the city center of Zawiyah, fighting is still continuing in the area. Rebel fighters are reportedly attempting to seize the 27 Bridge, named for the fact that it is located 27 kilometers from Tripoli. Gadhafi's forces in Tripoli can rely on a second key supply line passing from Ghadamis (at the nexus of the Libya-Tunisia-Algeria border) along the southern rim of the Nafusa Mountains, and then northward through the town Gharyan. The rebels claim to have seized Gharyan, but information coming out of this town has been limited. In monitoring the fighting being reported in the capital, several points are important to bear in mind.

Gadhafi's forces have fallen back around 10 kilometers east of Zawiyah and are still shelling the city. The retreat of pro-Gadhafi forces from a key town like Zawiyah indicates the weakening of the force overall, but does not necessarily suggest that the Libyan forces defending Tripoli will crumble at the sight of a rebel advance. Gadhafi's forces likely made a calculated risk to fall back and dig in around the capital where they could decide the grounds for the final fight, knowing that the rebel forces would be met with the extremely difficult challenge of trying to wage urban warfare. The costliness of urban fighting cannot be overestimated. Such warfare requires a well-trained force with high morale, and the rebel forces in the west are known to be few in number (estimated in the low thousands at most) and extremely ill-trained. If the rebel force advancing toward Tripoli from the west is the same force that has been fighting for Zawiyah, they are unlikely to be in any position to lay siege on Tripoli any time soon. Urban warfare is among the worst sorts of combat. The enemy does not have to be skilled to slow down movement. House-to-house fighting is the most murderous sort. The attacker must expose himself to fire. The defender must wait. A well-trained and motivated offensive force is needed, or a defensive force that has completely collapsed. There are no clear indications that the rebel forces have a reliable line of supply to sustain an offensive on the capital, nor are there signs of rebel forces based in the eastern stronghold of Benghazi making their way across the desert to reinforce the fighters based out of the Nafusa Mountains. Such troop movements from the east would be highly noticeable and reported by now. Fifty kilometers in war is a huge distance. Moving ten people into a meeting is murder. Moving thousands 50 kilometers, feeding them, getting them food, getting gasoline to

their vehicles and ammunition for guns is not easy and takes time.

Given that Gadhafi's supply lines from Tunisia through Zawiya and northward through Gharyan appear to be in rebel hands (at least for now), there remains the significant question of how well-stocked Gadhafi's forces are in Tripoli. If the rebel forces hope to starve out Gadhafi's forces by laying siege on the capital, they will also be starving out residents in Tripoli and risking backlash the longer this military campaign draws out.

NATO has been able to provide air support thus far to rebels advancing toward the capital, but the closer rebels get to Tripoli, a metropolis of roughly 2 million people, the higher the collateral damage and the more risk-averse NATO is likely to become in waging this campaign. The limitations on NATO air support will exacerbate the rebels' existing challenges in trying to seize the capital.

It is unlikely that the rebel forces advancing from Zawiya are fighting on their own. It will be important to watch for any signs of special operations forces from participating NATO countries quietly leading the offensive and preparing operations to locate and seize Gadhafi. Though such assistance is crucial for the rebels (especially when it comes to coordinating close-air support), special operations forces are trained and equipped for surgical operations, not for seizing and occupying major cities. Such operations are also highly dependent on reliable intelligence on Gadhafi's movements, which will be difficult to obtain.

The normal battle plan for taking a city is to surround it, bombard it and then move in slowly. A motivated defender will use the rubble to inflict casualties. It also results in large civilian casualties that run counter to the political needs of NATO. The best outcome is an uprising in the city and for the leadership to flee. Two things are needed for this. A place for the leaders to go and not be arrested and guarantees to the defenders that there will not be reprisals. The problem is that most defenders have nothing to lose. There has to be a period of time when the attackers can convince them that they do have something to lose. What NATO is looking for is an uprising by the very people who have resisted so far. What makes this difficult to achieve is that no one can guarantee their lives if they rise up. Gadhafi fleeing would also do the trick. But it is unclear if he will go, and if he does, where he will go.

The rebel disinformation campaign is in full swing. Reports are being spread of anti-Gadhafi residents in Tripoli coming out into the streets and engaging in celebratory gunfire in preparation for the fall of Gadhafi. Notably, the reports of anti-Gadhafi rallies in eastern Tripoli neighborhoods of Souq al-Jomaa and Tajoura are also areas that have witnessed clashes between pro- and anti-Gadhafi demonstrators since the beginning of the crisis and have been known to harbour anti-Gadhafi sentiment.

Reports of anti-Gadhafi rallies, along with rumors of Gadhafi stepping down and more high-level defections, are designed to trigger an uprising from within the capital to facilitate the rebel invasion. Reports out of the Libyan rebel media must be met with a great deal of suspicion given this reality.

What is happening now is the movement of the forces into attack positions, logistical support being brought in, preliminary targeted artillery fire and air strikes with special operations teams already in place doing careful targeting, and psychological warfare against the defenders. The most important thing to study now is the situation in Tripoli. So long as the troops remain loyal, it will be impossible to take the city. But if they break, then it can be done. Right now, everything is being done to reach subordinate commanders and try to convince them to refuse to resist and turn on loyalists. A lot of loose talk and a lot of explosions in Tripoli can be expected in the meantime.◆</p>