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Here's What We Can Do to Tackle Libya

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In 1986, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi gave an interview to a group of female foreign journalists. Then he invited them, one by one, into a room furnished with just a bed and television and propositioned them.

They rebuffed him, and after three successive rejections he got the message and gave up. But the incident reflects something important about Colonel Qaddafi that is worth remembering today: He's nuts.

The Libyan "[king of kings](#)" blends delusion, menace, pomposity, a penchant for risk-taking — and possession of tons of mustard gas. That's why it's crucial that world powers, working with neighboring countries like Egypt and Tunisia, steadily increase the pressure while Colonel Qaddafi is wobbling so that he leaves the scene as swiftly as possible.

Unfortunately, Mr. Qaddafi has gained a bit of ground in the last few days, at least in the capital of Tripoli. He has used mercenaries to terrorize people and even drag injured protesters out of hospitals, so a sullen calm has returned to Tripoli for now.

Is there anything that America and other countries can do? Yes, absolutely. But, first, a word about what we can't do.

It would be counterproductive for American and European troops to land on Libyan soil or to start bombing runs because that would play into Colonel Qaddafi's narrative about imperialists trying to seize his country. The truth is that after Iraq, we just don't have a realistic option of invading another Arab country with oil.

But what we can do is continue to squeeze Colonel Qaddafi, show resolve and make it clear that his departure is only a matter of time. That resolve won't change Colonel Qaddafi's mind, but it can peel off more of the Libyan military. And some of those military officers already are wavering.

On Saturday, when I was in Egypt and it looked as if the Qaddafi government might collapse at any time, I had a call from Tripoli: A senior Libyan military officer who had been ordered to attack rebel-held towns was defecting to the rebels instead. The officer wanted me to report his defection — along with his call for other military officers to do the same — and he had already recorded a video of his defection that I could post immediately on the New York Times Web site.

I was delighted but asked what preparations he had made to protect his family from retribution. None, it turned out.

I urged the officer to hide his family to ensure that his wife and children weren't kidnapped or killed in retaliation. A bit later, I heard back that the officer would accept the risk to his family. I suggested that the officer think this through carefully one more time — and this time the officer actually consulted his wife, who was displeased. The officer sheepishly postponed the announcement of his defection temporarily.

In the days since then, with Colonel Qaddafi having gained ground in Tripoli, the defection no longer seems to be on the table.

My sense is that many Libyan military officers are a bit like that one. They're uncomfortable attacking fellow Libyans, but they're also fearful that they or their families will be killed if they refuse. If the outside world signals resolutely that Colonel Qaddafi's ouster is only a matter of time, there's much more chance that officers will find ways to avoid going down with their leader.

The dispatch of American naval vessels to the sea off Libya is a useful step to show resolve. So are sanctions. A no-fly zone would have only a small impact on the fighting, but it would be a powerful signal to the Libyan military to stand down. [Amr Moussa](#), the secretary general of the Arab League, said Wednesday that the Arab League and African Union might work together to [impose a no-fly zone](#), and Western countries should cooperate closely with them on the idea. We could also try to disrupt Libya's military communications.

One possible solution to the crisis being discussed within Libya is for Colonel Qaddafi, who isn't actually president or prime minister, to retire with his sons to his hometown of Sirte and relinquish power to his longtime friend, Mohamed al-Zwai, who is technically head of state. Mr. Zwai, the former ambassador to Britain, has a reputation as a pragmatist and might then be able to bring in rival groups and tribes and stitch the country back together again in a more democratic way. It's a long shot but worth exploring — and it's feasible only if Colonel Qaddafi and his friends believe that otherwise they are going down.

The more pressure we apply, the more chance of avoiding an apocalypse. A well-connected friend in Tripoli grimly said of Colonel Qaddafi: "He believes that since he has nowhere to go, he'll take as many people with him as he can."

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