

BULLETIN

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United States and the Military Intervention in Libya

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U.S. forces have played a key role in the military operation in Libya. The scope of the involvement dwarfed the initial political goals set by the Obama administration. The intervention is not intended to bring down the Qaddafi regime, but the administration is actively supporting such an outcome. The U.S. has focused on maintaining the cohesiveness of the international coalition present in Libya, seeing it as a prerequisite for assuming auxiliary duties at NATO's behest. The administration's room for manoeuvre is limited by Congress' reluctance to provide funding for the operation.

Determinants of the U.S. Position. The initial hesitation of the United States toward establishing a no-fly zone over Libya, followed by the consistency with which the Obama administration attempted to limit U.S. involvement in the military side of the operation was influenced by two factors. First, the administration became divided about the political implications of becoming involved. It was feared that an outside military intervention could undermine the bottom-up, endogenous nature of the democratic wave in North Africa and the Middle East. As yet another example of military action in a Muslim country, following Afghanistan and Iraq, it could further damage the U.S. image in Arab countries of the region. At the same time, if the United States were to remain on the sidelines of the effort to set up a no-fly zone, it would risk being labelled as overly cautious, especially if the Libyan crisis resulted in mass atrocities against the civilian population. In the long run, the U.S. would also face charges of having contributed to the petering out of democratisation processes in the region. The Obama administration was criticized for behaving in a shaky manner during the unrest in Egypt, especially on the issue of President Mubarak's ouster, and to a lesser extent for passiveness during the forceful reaction against popular protests in Bahrain and Yemen.

Second, the U.S. military establishment questioned the effectiveness of a no-fly zone both as a means of protecting the civilian population and as an instrument of ensuring Colonel Qaddafi's fall from power. Sending in ground forces was ruled out entirely. In addition, arming Libyan rebels—called for by prominent politicians of the Republican Party and pondered by president Obama's aides—would have constituted a breach of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1970. According to the Pentagon, limits to the effectiveness of a no-fly zone, coupled with the lack of clarity concerning the end result of the operation, would put the U.S. at risk of getting seriously entangled in Libya in the long run. In case the situation on the ground deteriorated, U.S. forces would be called upon to augment their involvement, going beyond patrolling Libyan airspace and carrying out limited airstrikes against Libyan units and military installations, i.e., the daily bread of any no-fly zone.

Primacy of Multilateralism and Intensity of Engagement. The Obama administration decided to back the effort to adopt a no-fly zone only after a request for such an action by the UN Security Council had been voiced by the Arab League. As some members of the Arab League pledged to aid the implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1973, arguments by proponents of a more active U.S. stance on Libya, including the use of force to protect civilians, prevailed over the fears that the ensuing operation would be pictured as a purely Western endeavour. A coming together of a broad coalition of states, including a resolute France, a determined UK and a number of NATO members and Arab states, turned out to be sufficient for the U.S. to back a resolution that in the end not only mandated a no-fly zone, but also called upon the use of all necessary means to protect

the civilian population in the spirit of the “responsibility to protect” concept. It ensured that the international response would be forceful enough and that the U.S. would not be left to do all the heavy lifting, both militarily and in the political dimension.

Acting within a coalition of states was intended to provide legitimacy to U.S. military engagement and to chart a path toward a gradual transfer of responsibility for the particular components of “Operation Odyssey Dawn”—enforcing the embargo, establishing the no-fly zone, protecting the civilian population—to international partners. Once the Arab League criticised the first airstrikes against Libya as a breach of the UNSC mandate, and as first signs of discord appeared over what should be the optimal command and control arrangements during the remainder of the operation, the U.S. adopted a flexible stance, signalling its willingness to accept any solution that would keep the coalition intact. As a result, the U.S. agreed to set up an ad hoc structure involving members of NATO and the Arab League. Reservations uttered by Turkey and Arab states about vesting the political responsibility for the Libyan crisis with the North Atlantic Council could be therefore overcome, without ruling out the use of NATO’s command and control capabilities. In the period of March 23 to 31, NATO effectively took over the responsibility for all three dimensions of the intervention.

The U.S. Department of Defense announced that as the responsibility would shift toward NATO, the U.S. posture would evolve. During the first week of the operation, the U.S. forces flew nearly half of all combat sorties, excluding the strikes carried out with cruise missiles, and approximately 75% of non-combat sorties. In case of the U.S., out of all tasks completed in this period, more than 40% involved combat. After NATO has taken over the responsibility for the military operations, American activity is expected to be highest with respect to non-combat missions, e.g. surveillance and logistical support.

Goals of Involvement. Speculation about the goals of the U.S. military’s involvement in Libya arose largely because Obama decided not to backtrack on his own words from early March, when he called upon Qaddafi to step down. The administration was tireless in its efforts to paint the operation as limited in scope by Resolution 1973, i.e., intended to ensure the protection of civilians, to enable the inflow of humanitarian aid, and to achieve a cease-fire. As a result, in the initial phase of the operation U.S. officials implied that the military operation would achieve its goals even if Qaddafi were to stay in power.

The U.S. stance evolved as the coalition succeeded in establishing a no-fly zone and after the rebels took the initiative and advanced their lines. The operation received a boost in legitimacy following the direct involvement of Arab units, and reports began to circulate about possible defections from the ranks of Qaddafi’s inner circle. The Obama administration stated that the airstrikes would stop only after Libyan forces were summoned back to their barracks. In practical terms, then, the U.S. began to define the political goal of the military operation as creating conditions conducive to the ultimate success of the rebellion. The U.S. appointed a special envoy to liaison with the Libyan opposition, and the possibility of arming the rebels began to be once again pondered quite openly. Immediately prior to handing over the full responsibility for the operation to NATO, U.S. forces stepped up their attacks against Qaddafi’s units.

Domestic Debate: Funding for the Operation. The reaction of the U.S. Congress to the use of force in Libya was mixed. Leaders of the Republican Party criticised the lack of clarity in the reasons for involvement and the resulting open-endedness of the operation. Politicians from both major parties questioned the legality of undertaking a military action without Congressional authorization. The administration announced that it will not attempt to secure such a mandate, referring to the president’s constitutional prerogatives as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and thus suggesting that it intends to quickly wrap up the military activities. This stance seems to be taking into account the impact that this long-standing legal dispute might have on the debate over funding for the operation. Currently, the Department of Defense covers these expenses based on a continuing resolution—an inflexible tool when applied to military operations—that is due to expire on April 8. If the Congress were to find that the administration did not have sufficient reasons to resort to the use of force, it can block, or at least limit the resources available for the operation in Libya after that date, tuning in to the dominant tone in the ongoing debate over the U.S. defence budget that stresses cuts and streamlining of expenses.