

# WebMemo



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## U.S. Role in Libya: Answers to the Tough Questions

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Dramatic and rapidly changing events in the Middle East raise serious questions about the appropriate U.S. role and the direction of the Administration's policies. The right approach would be to remain skeptical about the use of U.S. forces while at the same time envisioning a more proactive role for Congress and demanding a long-term strategy from the White House.

The Administration must demonstrate that it plans to come to grips with the spread of terrorism, work to bring an end to the odious regime in Tripoli, and support the legitimate aspiration of people in the region for peace and liberty.

**What Is the Appropriate Use of the U.S. Military?** The passage of the U.N. Security Council Resolution endorsing the use of force in Libya raises many questions concerning the use of the U.S. military in any operations. There is a dramatic difference between supporting the cause of liberty and providing humanitarian assistance in a "permissive" environment and directly intervening in an ongoing conflict. The rules are different. The role of American armed forces in combat should be reserved for vital U.S. interests. Military force should also only be used when there is a credible, suitable, and acceptable plan to accomplish an achievable aim. When it comes to combat situations, U.S. forces are not for just a "show of force."

When it comes to a battle situation, national interests—not just the impulse to "do something"—has to be the deciding factor. In Libya, at present there is no apparent vital national interest. Nor is

it clear that U.S. force would be decisive in either taking down the regime, preventing a humanitarian crisis, or saving the opposition. Conditions may change in the future (for example, terrorists might set up a safe haven), but that is the condition at present.

The U.S. does have interests in the outcome of the current conflict. Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi has committed crimes against Americans, and it is in the national interest to bring him to justice. Moreover, a protracted civil war in Libya risks spreading instability throughout the region, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis that could spill over to NATO's front door, and creating a failed state that could become a sanctuary for transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. But, for now, these can be addressed without U.S. military intervention.

What is appropriate for the U.S. to provide, short of direct intervention, is support to a "legitimate" opposition. What is appropriate and necessary includes:

1. Actions to protect innocents;
2. Preventing and limiting support to terrorist groups; and

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3. Limiting aid to the regime and supporting effective measures to bring its leaders to justice.

What is appropriate for all these activities has to be dictated by conditions on the ground. This is a dynamic situation, so it is difficult to predict. That said, none of these activities should be allowed to detract from accomplishing other vital military missions.

**What Does the Administration Need to Do in Order to Act?** Whenever contemplating the use of force, it is always best to have as many friends in the foxhole as possible and to call for the support of the American people and explain both the rationale for action and what must be done. As Heritage Foundation Vice President for Foreign Policy Kim Holmes stated in a paper written in response to 9/11, Presidents should seek “the solid support of the Congress and the international community.”

This does not mean that the U.S. must have a U.N. Security Council resolution to act. Indeed, the White House erred in rushing to push through Resolution 1970, which prohibited any assistance, including helping the opposition “even to protect civilians or prevent atrocities.” It was certainly a mistake for the Administration to run to the U.N. before it even understood what military action might be warranted. It took another week—and only after the military situation for the opposition became dire—for the Administration to obtain another resolution that allows it to effectively do anything. This should serve as an object lesson that abdicating the responsibility and action of sovereign power to the U.N. is not wise.

Nor is it necessary for the President to declare war to employ military forces.

On the other hand, it would be prudent for the President to seek a resolution for the use of force from Congress. This gesture would demonstrate that the President is acting with the strong support of the nation through the voice of its elected representatives.

It is particularly important for the President to engage with Congress and explain its actions, because to this point the White House policy—including the Secretary of Defense questioning the

feasibility or appropriateness of conducting a no-fly zone, only to see the Administration days later demand one—has made the Administration appear feckless and confused. The White House must regain the confidence of Congress.

**What’s Next?** Shortly after the U.N. announced its resolution, the regime in Tripoli declared a cease-fire, claiming that civilians were now no longer at risk and that military action is no longer justified. Nations anxious to use the endorsement of the U.N. may disagree and act anyway.

On the other hand, some may claim that the cease-fire is a vindication of this Administration’s policy—ending the bloodshed without firing a shot. Such enthusiasm is premature. It was never likely that a military action based primarily on the application of airpower was going to be decisive to either prevent a humanitarian crisis, overthrow the regime, or protect opposition forces. A cease-fire, likewise, does not resolve anything—including the role of force.

For example, the opposition may become a magnet for terrorists, extremists, and foreign fighters who not only want to take on Tripoli but could also be recruits for al-Qaeda or attempt to take the war to other countries in the Middle East. Will the U.S. and the U.N. fight to protect a terrorist haven?

What if Tripoli just waits until other nations lose interest and just rushes in and wipes out the opposition before anyone can act? Are the U.S. and other nations willing to stand by with military force 24/7/365 to protect a Libyan rump state? Or will they lose interest after CNN moves on?

There is no simple and quick outcome in Libya that will leave a land run by “good guys,” put the “bad guys” in jail, and safeguard the innocents. If the U.S. wants to safeguard its interests in the region, aid its friends and allies, and support the cause of liberty, it is going to need a long-term strategy. That strategy must:

- Identify, aid, and muster support for a legitimate opposition that is free of terrorist elements and precautions to ensure that any weapons we supply are not sold or diverted to other groups and rule out supplying arms (“Stinger” anti-aircraft missiles, for example) that could pose a potent

threat to U.S. forces if they end up in the hands of terrorists;

- Support responsible efforts to isolate the regime in Tripoli, deny it arms and support, and isolate it politically and economically with the aim of bringing its leaders to justice;
- Support humanitarian operations to safeguard the lives of innocents; and
- Prevent the regime from reacquiring weapons of mass destruction technologies, supporting international terrorism, or establishing terrorist sanctuaries in the country.

**Forward-Looking.** Libya is just one country in a region going through world-historical transformation. The U.S. needs—not just for this country but for its approach to this part of the world—proactive long-term strategies that look ahead of events rather than trail them.

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