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Americans appear wary over U.S. role in Libya

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - Early comments online and in newspapers point to cautious American support for a limited role in bombing Libyan air defenses but wariness over entangling the United States in an ill-defined military mission.

The United States was slow to act on Libya yet wise to play down its role in a military intervention, some U.S. editorials, columnists and bloggers said. They also raised concerns over a perceived lack of leadership in a "war by committee."

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, in power since a military coup in 1969, lost control of large sections of the country in a revolt last month and his forces had been fighting back.

But a military coalition, including France, Britain and the United States, has been firing missiles at Libyan targets for several days to enforce a no-fly zone over the country, which was approved by the U.N. Security Council on Thursday.

The Libyan uprising followed popular revolutions -- without international intervention -- that ousted the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt.

The Wall Street Journal, which had called for action and is often aligned with Republican views, welcomed the assault but criticized its method.

"The use of force against Libya looks like the first war by global committee," The newspaper said on Monday. "We support the military action, even if it is much belated."

"But the war's early prosecution also raises concern about its leadership, its limited means and strategic goals. On none of these have coalition members been clear or unified, starting with President (Barack) Obama," the newspaper said.

Washington, looking to extract itself from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wants as low a profile as possible in Libya, although it has quietly taken the lion's share of missile and air strikes so far, diplomats say.

The Washington Post backed limited goals.

"The president has been right to weigh U.S. options carefully and to work diligently to assemble a coalition. The United States cannot fight a war on behalf of Libyan rebels," it said in an editorial on Friday.

But as the White House said on Monday it would transfer the lead role in the North African operation within days, the U.S.-based CNN television news network was asking viewers, "Does the United States have a clear mission in Libya?"

Libya was not a hot topic on the social networking site Twitter on Monday. Among tweets, @scottbohlinger said, "Even if not fully consistent, action against Gaddafi achieves the political end of discouraging more abuse of human rights," while @improvcellist said: "I absolutely despise what Obama is doing in Libya. Let's help Japan instead."

A straw poll online at www.reuters.com found 58 percent of the 1,643 respondents supported the air strikes on Libya by the coalition, while 42 percent opposed them.

A Pew Research Center poll released a week ago found that 63 percent of Americans did not believe the United States had a responsibility to do something about the fighting in Libya.

'TROUBLING VAGUE'

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote on The Huffington Post website that Obama made the wrong decision by becoming involved in the Libyan conflict.

"Libya is not America's war. It is justified neither on security or humanitarian grounds. Nor can Washington, overwhelmed with current deficits and future liabilities, afford to be world's permanent 911 number," Bandow wrote, referring to the U.S. emergency help number.

The USA Today newspaper said in an editorial on Monday that the definition of success for the military operation remained "troublingly vague," but that the patient diplomacy that led to the intervention had been encouraging.



"Obama's plan to step back within days after the initial attacks and cede substantial leadership to Europeans and Arabs is particularly wise," said the newspaper, adding the military action should be aimed "at a clear, attainable goal and fought with total commitment."

Howard Kurtz said in the online newspaper The Daily Beast that "Obama's move seems to have united the right and the center-left behind the barely debated military action -- but not the most liberal players in the punditocracy."

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat wrote on Monday that while there were advantages to this type of military operation -- such as spreading the burden and taking the edge off "instinctive anti-Americanism" -- there were also problems.

"Because liberal wars depend on constant consensus-building within the (so-called) international community, they tend to be fought by committee, at a glacial pace, and with a caution that shades into tactical incompetence," he wrote.

An editorial on Saturday in the New York Daily News tabloid said Obama had sacrificed "clarity of mission to international consensus."

It said Gaddafi must be stopped, but "that said, much else remains disturbingly unclear, including the scope of the larger mission and the identity of the commander who will ultimately call the shots."

"Waging war -- and this is war -- by committee is a losing proposition. That must not happen," the newspaper said.

(Reporting by [Michelle Nichols](#); Editing by [Peter Cooney](#))

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