

The USA and Libya: what's going on?

American forces embarked on "Operation Odyssey Dawn" Saturday as the U.S. joined France and Britain in launching air strikes against the Libyan government. The attack, which marked America's third foray into war with an Arab nation in less than a decade, came exactly eight years to the day that President Bush authorized military action in Iraq.



(Rick Loomis/Los Angeles Times/MCT)

Several supporters cheered and chanted pro-Gadhafi slogans during a fireworks show and at the end were given armloads of free food supplies at a stadium a few kilometers from the city center of Zawiya, Libya.

Four weeks earlier, Libyan citizens began protesting, calling for the ousting of their president, Col. Moammar Gadhafi. In response to the protests, Gadhafi's forces instituted a media blackout and began attacking and killing civilian dissenters.

With the support of the United Nations, an international coalition agreed to implement a "no-fly zone" over Libya.

"Left unchecked, we have every reason to believe that Gadhafi would commit atrocities against his people," President Obama said. "The United States of America will not stand idly by."

Obama stressed, however, that the action in Libya would be a limited engagement with no ground troops.

But for many Americans who may feel blindsided by the suddenness of the conflict, questions abound. "What's going on, exactly?"

The Rebel Uprising

For over four decades, Gadhafi has reigned as the leader of Libya, a nation that boasts plentiful oil reserves. Yet relative to other oil-rich Arab states, the Libyan people fare poorly. Corruption runs through the veins of its government as unemployment levels stand at 30 percent and children starve from malnutrition.

Despite the woes of the people, dissent has been heavily discouraged in Libya—and sometimes brutally suppressed. Some Libyans, fearing that using his name in public might raise suspicions of insurrection, referred to Gadhafi simply as "the leader."

But things changed drastically as democratic revolutions began to brew throughout North Africa and the Middle East. In February, on the heels of the Egyptian people's successful overthrow of the Mubarak regime, Libyan dissidents found themselves emboldened. They set out to protest the Gadhafi government in a planned "Day of Rage."

Key to the initial protests were the families of some 1,200 prisoners killed by Libyan forces in a 1996 prison massacre. The families became enraged after the lawyer who had represented them was arrested on February 15.

After the protests began, Libyan novelist Idris Al-Mesmari told Arab news network Al Jazeera that police dressed in civilian clothing had begun attacking protesters. The connection was lost, however, and hours later, Al Jazeera reported that the writer had been arrested.

The protests were not stifled, however, and over the course of the ensuing weeks, they spread across the country as government officials continued to clash with the pro-democracy rebels.

Gadhafi's son, Seif al-Islam el-Gadhafi, warned that the protests could lead to a civil war that would imperil vital infrastructure and possibly invite invasion from Western forces. But the government, he said, would not back down.

"We will fight until the last man, until the last woman, until the last bullet," he said in a statement just days after the uprising began. By that point, Gadhafi's forces had already killed hundreds.

An International Consensus

This time, the U.S. was not the driving force in pushing for military action — Europe was.

Several weeks ago, British Prime Minister David Cameron became the first to consider the option of implementing a no-fly zone.

That may be unsurprising, considering Gadhafi has claimed responsibility for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 – an attack which killed 270 people over Lockerbie, Scotland, and remains the worst terrorist attack on British soil to date.

Still, Cameron was initially alone in his calls for a no-fly zone. But as Gadhafi's forces continued to brutalize civilians, Cameron's proposal began to gain traction among the allies.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy emerged as one of the most stalwart proponents of a no-fly zone, proving to be a very different leader than his predecessor, anti-war President Jacques Chirac.

"The Arab people have chosen to liberate themselves from the servitude they have found themselves locked in for too long," Sarkozy said. "These revolutions have made a huge hope grow in the heart of all those who share the values of democracy and human rights."

Yet alongside genuine concern and a desire to promote democracy, geography may also play a role in the European desire to stave off a humanitarian crisis in Libya. Unlike Iraq, the only thing that separates Libya from the shores of Europe is the Mediterranean Sea. With tensions already mounting throughout Europe over a growing Muslim immigrant population, the last thing many European leaders want is an influx of Libyan refugees.

While one might imagine that Bush would have been quick to join Cameron and Sarkozy, Obama's response was characteristically restrained, even in the face of an urgent crisis.

Internal administration discussions debated the wisdom of intervening in Libya. But Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, perhaps haunted by her husband's missed opportunity to prevent genocide in Rwanda during the 90s, insisted that the U.S. must step in. In the end, Obama agreed.

"I am deeply aware of the risks of any military action, no matter what limits we place on it," Obama said Saturday, as he announced military action. "I want the American people to know that the use of force is not our first choice and it's not a choice that I make lightly."

"But we cannot stand idly by when a tyrant tells his people that there will be no mercy, and his forces step up their assaults on cities like Benghazi and Misurata, where innocent men and women face brutality and death at the hands of their own government."

Gadhafi responded to Saturday's air strikes, calling them a "colonial crusader aggression that may ignite another large-scale crusader war." That war, he promised, would be a long one.

A War Fatigued Nation

Gadhafi wasn't the only one who was unhappy about the air strikes. Back home, Obama faced criticism from the left and right — but mostly from the left.

At a Democratic Caucus conference call on Saturday, nine Democrats, including Reps. Dennis Kucinich (Ohio), Maxine Walters (Calif.), and Sheila Jackson Lee (Texas) questioned the constitutionality of the president's actions. Kucinich, who once advocated the impeachment of Bush and Vice President Cheney, even raised the specter of impeachment in light of the missile strikes.

But while few Americans are likely to go as far as calling for impeachment, recent polls conducted during the lead up to the airstrikes paint a portrait of a war weary nation. A CNN poll showed that 74 percent of Americans thought the U.S. should "leave it to others," while a Fox News poll showed that 65 percent of registered voters opposed U.S. military involvement.

Some anti-war liberals were simply disappointed. Others were outraged. In a scathing criticism penned for the Huffington Post by Doug Bandow, he argued that Obama had deceived anti-war voters by allowing them to "assume he was on their side because of his prescient opposition to the Iraq war." It turns out, Bandow said, that Iraq may be the only foreign policy difference between Obama and Bush.

One key area of contention between Obama and anti-war activists is a campaign promise made back in 2007. At that time, Obama promised not to repeat what he considered to be Bush's foreign policy mistakes, arguing that the "president does not have the power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involving stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation."

For disappointed anti-war activists, that may seem like a promise broken.

But Saturday was not the first time Obama hinted at a broader approach to war. Following the announcement of a troop surge in Afghanistan in December 2009, Obama carefully articulated his views on war during his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

"I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people," he said. "For make no mistake, evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history; the imperfection of man and the limits of reason."

On the conservative side of the aisle, criticism was not as rampant.

McCain, who is usually a fierce opponent of the president's policies, could only offer that he believed Obama had waited too long. Still, McCain agreed with the decision, adding that "we need, now, to support him and the efforts that our military are going to make."

The Atlantic magazine's Andrew Sullivan lamented that "one can see only one difference between Obama and McCain in this respect: about three weeks."