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Did We Have to Get into the War to Find Out Why We Were Fighting It?

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| March 23, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#) ^[2]



Lots of people have mordantly poked fun at former Speaker Nancy Pelosi's remark during the health care debate that "we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what's in it." (At least Congress was involved on that issue.)

Did the Obama administration have to get into Libya's civil war so that we could find out what the U.S. military would do there? There's been an awful lot of frustration in Congress and among policy analysts about the war, and a lot of the frustration has resulted from the utter opacity and contradictions emanating from the Obama administration.

Earlier this week, Ben Friedman made a valiant effort to bring some order to the chaos, judging that the U.S.-led coalition was using defensive tactics in pursuit of offensive goals ^[3], and concluded this way:

I would have preferred for the United States to stay out of this civil war but for intelligence support and advice to the rebels. If we can disengage and leave the bombing to the Europeans, I hope we do so. But whoever is taking the lead should acknowledge that they are sponsoring rebels aiming to overthrow Qaddafi and adopt a policy that does more than defend them. The allies should give the rebels close air

support and maybe strategic bombing. If that means abusing the words of the U.N. resolution, so be it. If it costs the support of the Arab League and whoever else supports air strikes based on the pretense that they are purely humanitarian, it's probably a trade worth making...

So my take on the situation as of Monday afternoon was that we had decided to de facto partition the country by defending Benghazi from the air, but would not be providing close air support for the rebels or siding with them in any explicit way. My thinking was based in part on a blog post by Josh Rogin that was linked in Ben's post, in which Gen. Carter Ham offered this cringe-inducing explanation of what we're doing [4]:

"We do not provide close air support for the opposition forces. We protect civilians," Gen. Carter Ham, the top military official in charge of the operation, told reporters in a conference call on Monday. The problem is, there is no official communication with the rebel forces on the ground and there is no good way to distinguish the rebel fighters engaged against the government forces from civilians fighting to protect themselves, he said. [emphasis added]

[...]

Where [pilots] see a clear situation where civilians are threatened, they have... intervened," said Ham. "When it's unclear that it's civilians that are being attacked, the air crews are instructed to be very cautious."

"We have no authority and no mission to support the opposition forces in what they might do," he added.

What's more, the coalition forces won't attack Qaddafi's forces if they are battling rebel groups, only if they are attacking "civilians," Ham explained. If the Qaddafi forces seem to be preparing to attack civilians, they can be attacked; but if they seem to be backing away, they won't be targeted.

"What we look for, to the degree that we can, is to discern intent," said Ham. "There's no simple answer." [emphasis added]

Attempting to discern intent from the sky seems like an extraordinarily tough job. Now, though, comes word that Ham's comments two days ago have already been overtaken by events [5] (and comments from his subordinate, the tactical commander, Admiral Gary Locklear):

U.S. and coalition air forces in the "coming hours and days" will target ground forces of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, including the brigade commanded by one of his sons, the top U.S. tactical commander said.

The 32nd Brigade, which is estimated to have as many as 10,000 troops and is commanded by Qaddafi's youngest son, Khamis, has the best equipment and is the "primary regime protection element," according to a Pentagon statement.

The brigade is a "premier force for Colonel Qaddafi" that "we have been watching closely," U.S. Admiral Samuel Locklear told reporters at the Pentagon via telephone from his command ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Initially arrayed around Tripoli, the brigade has moved some of its elements around the country to reinforce other Libyan forces under attack, he said.

And the *New York Times* today contains [this item](#) [6]:

As long as the regime's forces are fighting in and around cities where the allies have ordered them to back off, [Rear Adm. Gerard Hueber] said, coalition attacks would continue. He said the allies are in communication with the Libyan units about what they need to do, where to go and how to arrange their forces to avoid attack, but that there was "no indication" that the regime's ground forces were following the instructions.

So today, if Qaddafi won't send all of his ground forces where we tell him to send them, we intend to attack them. Just two days ago, Gen. Ham was saying that we would only attack his forces if they were attacking civilians. Now, if Qaddafi's people are fighting the rebels where we told them not to, they're targets. What our mission will be tomorrow is still anybody's guess.

More by

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[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/justin-logan>

[3] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/offensive-goals-defensive-tactics>

[4] http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/21/rules_of_engagement_are_murky_in_libya_air_war

[5] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-22/coalition-eyes-qaddafi-s-premier-unit-to-attack-locklear-said.html>

[6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/world/africa/24libya.html?pagewanted=all>