
Brown circumspect on Libya escalation

By Theo Emery

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WASHINGTON — Senator Scott Brown yesterday stopped short of joining demands that the Obama administration intensify its military role against Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy, saying the president must first make the case for further involvement.

On Sunday, three members who serve with Brown on the Senate Armed Services Committee urged the White House to arm the Libyan rebels and expand NATO-led air attacks, saying the stalemate is killing civilians and emboldening Khadafy.

One senator, Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, went further, saying the United States should push NATO to “cut the head of the snake off, go to Tripoli, start bombing Khadafy’s inner circle.”

Brown, however, was more circumspect. In a statement released by his office, the Republican said he backed the “limited humanitarian mission originally described by President Obama,” but added “if the use of military force is going to be expanded, the president needs to clearly explain our goals and strategy to the American people and Congress.”

Although Obama has said regime change in Libya is not a primary goal of the intervention, he has authorized the use of Predator drone strikes, and direct attacks against the government power structure are increasing.

Libyan government officials lashed out at NATO yesterday, saying a bombing raid on Khadafy’s headquarters in Tripoli amounted to an assassination attempt. A government spokesman said that Khadafy was not injured.

Meanwhile, Khadafy’s forces continued their shelling of the rebel-held city of Misurata, killing at least 10 people and overwhelming hospitals.

The pattern of attacks, retreat, and counterattacks of both the rebels and government forces has decimated several towns and villages, killing hundreds of civilians.

Senators John McCain of Arizona, a Republican who just returned from visiting the rebels in eastern Libya, and Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, an independent, joined Graham in saying the United States and NATO must provide either decisive firepower from air attacks or weapons and training for the ill-equipped, fragmented rebels.

Brown’s comments, however, indicated a reluctance to escalate the conflict without a further statement from the Obama administration.

While Brown was initially cautious about imposing a US-led no-fly zone over Libya, he has generally stood by the administration’s actions.

Christopher A. Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Brown has successfully walked a line between those advocating an interventionist position and those opposing it.

“I have seen in his statements and in his voting record a certain pragmatism, a willingness to ask hard questions,” Preble said. “Senator McCain and Senator Graham are very influential in the caucus and among their colleagues, but they’re not the only voices on foreign policy, even in the Republican Party.”

Another Armed Services Committee member from New England, Republican Susan Collins of Maine, expressed reservations yesterday. The role for the United States should be limited to intelligence, logistics, and other capabilities that NATO and other allies lack, she said.

Brown’s Democratic counterpart from the Bay State, Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry, was an early proponent of US involvement in drawing up plans for a no-fly zone and destruction of Libya’s air defense system.

But he specifically called for those actions only to prevent Khadafy from attacking civilians. The NATO air campaign, and now the bombing of Khadafy's headquarters, has surpassed those limited measures. The senator was traveling yesterday and unavailable for comment, a spokeswoman said.

Anthony H. Cordesman, a former director of intelligence assessment for the secretary of defense and now a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said it should not be a surprise that restive members of Congress are calling for further action.

"We have no idea what the endgame is here. We have no idea whether the administration, or France or Britain are really prepared to deal with the aftermath of this," he said. "The new government is going to need a lot of help and a lot of advice."

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