



Obama Defends U.S. Role in Libya

In his March 28 [address to the American people](#) on the crisis in Libya, the President spoke of "leaving Iraq to its people," but pointed with pride to our nation's role in "supporting our ally in Japan," as well as "stopping the Taliban's momentum in Afghanistan and going after al Qaeda around the globe." America, he said, as "an anchor of global security and advocate for human freedom," is, nonetheless, "naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act. That is what happened in Libya over the course of the last six weeks."



Yet the President repeated and emphasized his pledge of a limited involvement in Libya, using air power to stop the regime of Moammar Gaddafi in its aerial assault on the Libyan people, but not sending U.S. ground forces into the civil war there and not attempting to overthrow the Libyan dictator militarily. In that, he is applying the lessons of recent U.S. history, he said.

"To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq," the President noted in his speech from the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. "Thanks to the extraordinary sacrifices of our troops and the determination of our diplomats, we are hopeful about Iraq's future. But regime change there took eight years, thousands of American and Iraqi lives, and nearly a trillion dollars. That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya."

Obama noted that Libya lies between Tunisia and Egypt, "two nations that inspired the world when their people rose up to take control of their own destiny." When Libyan people also "took to the streets to claim their basic human rights," Gaddafi, whom Obama described as a ruthless tyrant, "began attacking his own people." After evacuating our embassy and all Americans in Libya who sought assistance, the United States froze more than \$33 billion in the Gaddafi regime's assets. The United States joined with other members of the United Nations Security Council to broaden economic sanctions and impose an arms embargo. "I made it clear that Gaddafi had lost the confidence of his people and the legitimacy to lead, and I said that he needed to step down from power," Obama declared. Gaddafi, he said, responded to the world's condemnation by escalating the attacks on the Libyan people.

"Innocent people were targeted for killing. Hospitals and ambulances were attacked. Journalists were arrested, sexually assaulted, and killed. Supplies of food and fuel were choked off. The water for hundreds of thousands of people in Misratah was shut off. Cities and towns were shelled, mosques destroyed, and apartment buildings reduced to rubble. Military jets and helicopter gunships were unleashed upon people who had no means to defend themselves against assault from the air." The United States and its allies succeeded in getting a resolution passed by the U.N. Security Council authorizing a "No Fly Zone" to stop the aerial assault. Gaddafi had declared he would show "no mercy"



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in combating the popular uprising and history indicated he would be true to that pledge, Obama said. "In the past, we had seen him hang civilians in the streets, and kill over a thousand people in a single day. Now, we saw regime forces on the outskirts of the city. We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi — a city nearly the size of Charlotte [North Carolina] — could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world. It was not in our national interest to let that happen. I refused to let that happen."

The President said he authorized military action "after consulting the bipartisan leadership of Congress," but made no mention of the constitutional provision giving Congress the sole authority to declare war. "I authorized military action to stop the killing and enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1973," he said. "We struck regime forces approaching Benghazi to save that city and the people within it. We hit Gaddafi's troops in neighboring Ajdabiya, allowing the opposition to drive them out. We hit his air defenses, which paved the way for a No Fly Zone. We targeted tanks and military assets that had been choking off towns and cities and we cut off much of their source of supply. And tonight, I can report that we have stopped Gaddafi's deadly advance."

The United States has not acted alone, he pointed out, noting the participation of Arab partners, including Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, as well as allies such as the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Turkey. The President took obvious pride in how quickly the coalition came together, comparing it with the intervention in Bosnia in the 1990s, when it "took a year to intervene with air power to protect civilians."

He repeated his pledge to keep American's role limited and that there would be no U.S. ground forces involved. The United States has focused "our unique capabilities on the front end of the operation" and is now transferring responsibility "to our allies and partners," he said, announcing that the responsibility of protecting Libyan civilians will be transferred from the United States to NATO on Wednesday. The United States will continue to play what the President described as a supporting role, including "intelligence, logistical support, search and rescue assistance, and capabilities to jam regime communications." The President claimed the success of the mission thus far has proved the doubters and naysayers wrong.

"So for those who doubted our capacity to carry out this operation, I want to be clear: the United States of America has done what we said we would do," Obama said. There yet remains the task of joining with the "international community" to provide "assistance to the people of Libya, who need food for the hungry and medical care for the wounded." The \$33 billion in assets frozen from the Gaddafi regime will be used to rebuild Libya, he said. "After all, this money does not belong to Gaddafi or to us — it belongs to the Libyan people, and we will make sure they receive it," the President promised.

"It is true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs," he conceded. "And given the costs and risks of intervention, we must always measure our interests against the need for action. But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right. In this particular country — Libya — at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. We had a unique ability to stop that violence: an international mandate for action, a broad coalition prepared to join us, the support of Arab countries, and a plea for help from the Libyan people themselves."

Obama claimed America also has a strategic interest in stopping the slaughter in Libya. "A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful — yet fragile — transitions in Egypt and Tunisia," he said. "The democratic impulses that



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are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of dictatorship, as repressive leaders concluded that violence is the best strategy to cling to power. The writ of the UN Security Council would have been shown to be little more than empty words, crippling its future credibility to uphold global peace and security."

Asserting his role as Commander in Chief of the armed forces to act in defense of America's "interests and values," Obama also stressed the advantage of acting in concert with other nations to reduce the risks and costs to the United States. While rejecting the use of military force to oust Gaddafi from power, he held out the hope that the military actions thus far undertaken, along with continued economic and diplomatic pressures, will force him to step down. Addressing the rebellions against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, Obama said:

The United States will not be able to dictate the pace and scope of this change. Only the people of the region can do that. But we can make a difference. I believe that this movement of change cannot be turned back, and that we must stand alongside those who believe in the same core principles that have guided us through many storms: our opposition to violence directed against one's own citizens; our support for a set of universal rights, including the freedom for people to express themselves and choose their leaders; our support for governments that are ultimately responsive to the aspirations of the people.

"It can be tempting to turn away from the world," Obama cautioned, though critics on both the right and the left have argued the United States is too much involved in conflicts both between and within nations, often without the authority of Congress. An editorial on the website of the left-liberal [The Nation](#) magazine noted that the action in Libya is not the open-ended commitment Iraq turned out to be and, unlike the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, was undertaken with U.N. approval. But "like the Iraq war, the Libya intervention is a war of choice, undertaken by an executive acting without Congressional authorization," the editorial said. "This is a continuation of a dangerous — and unconstitutional — precedent, one that President Obama himself opposed when he was a senator."

Conservative columnist and commentator [Pat Buchanan](#) has also argued against the kind of precedent that is being followed and advanced by the U.S. intervention in Libya:

Since Bush I, we have intervened in Panama, Kuwait, Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya. Had John McCain and Joe Lieberman had their way, we would have been fighting Russians in Georgia and bombing Iran," Buchanan said in a recent column. "Add up all those we have killed, wounded, widowed, orphaned and uprooted, and the number runs into the millions. All these wars have helped mightily to bankrupt us.

Buchanan ended his argument with a question: "Have they made us more secure?"

Photo of Obama addressing the nation on Libya, March 28: AP Images

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