

US Senate discusses sending troops to Libya

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Gen. Carter Ham told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Wednesday that US troops may have to be sent to Libya because there is little chance of the opposition Transitional National Council (TNC) defeating the forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Ham, who led the coalition air campaign in Libya before NATO took over, made clear that he was not personally in favour of such an outcome. He was responding to questioning from Republican senators, such as John McCain, who have been scathing towards what they call the half-hearted pursuit of the war in Libya by the Obama administration.

Asked about the chance the opposition could “fight their way” to Tripoli and replace Gaddafi, Ham replied: “Sir, I would assess that as a low likelihood.”

Pressed by McCain on whether the situation was either a stalemate or an “emerging stalemate,” Ham said, “Senator, I would agree with that at present on the ground.” A stalemate appeared “more likely” today than it did at the outset of the air campaign on March 19, he said.

McCain wants the US to drop the pretence that the direct aim of the air war is not regime-change. In his testimony, Ham said that the ousting of Gaddafi did not fall within the remit of the UN-mandated mission to protect civilians under Security Council Resolution 1973. The US wanted to rely on diplomatic and other means to force him to step down, he insisted.

But with a stalemate likely, he said, the US may consider sending troops to Libya as part of an international ground force that could aid the rebels. “I suspect there might be some consideration of that,” he told the committee.

He warned that US participation in a ground invasion was problematic, as it might erode support within the international coalition, making it more difficult, in particular, for Arab regimes to continue backing the war. “My personal view at this point would be that that’s probably not the ideal circumstance, again for the regional reaction that having American boots on the ground would entail,” he said.

Expanding NATO’s declared mission to ousting Gaddafi would necessitate a “pretty significant increase” in the military effort and “probably” require coalition troops and spies, he added. It would require “military forces to be able to act on very, very short notice.”

“We would find it more difficult to find willing partners,” he said, and it would “have a negative effect on the Arab League.”

Asked about arming and training the rebels, Ham said he had “some indication that some

Arab nations are, in fact, starting to do that at present.” But he cautioned that the US needed to be sure of who would be getting weapons before it did the same. “We have some history in trying to apply military force to regime-change where we have been less than successful,” he warned.

He cited the danger that Al Qaeda militants could seize some of the estimated 20,000 shoulder-launched missiles in Libya, which was “a regional and an international concern.”

Ham’s testimony pointed to an escalation of the war, while reflecting the pressing concerns of sections of the US military and political establishment. Testimony given by others was more damaging to the US propaganda used to justify the bombardment of Libya—and received far less media attention.

Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a State Department official in the first two years of the administration of George W. Bush, rejected claims that military intervention was necessary to prevent a civilian massacre by Gaddafi’s regime. “First, it is not clear that a humanitarian catastrophe was imminent in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi,” he said in his prepared statement to the committee.

“There had been no reports of large-scale massacres in Libya up to that point,” he continued, “and Libyan society (unlike Rwanda, to cite the obvious influential precedent) is not divided along a single or defining fault line. Gaddafi saw the rebels as enemies for political reasons, not for their ethnic or tribal associations... there is no evidence of which I am aware that civilians per se would have been targeted on a large scale.”

Turning to the demand for regime-change, he insisted, “American policymakers erred in calling explicitly early on in the crisis for Gaddafi’s removal. Doing so made it far more difficult to employ diplomacy to help achieve US humanitarian goals without resorting to military force. It removed the incentive Gaddafi might have had to stop attacking his opponents.”

The US had ensured that the civil war would escalate, Haass suggested. He added that “requiring Gaddafi’s removal actually makes it more difficult to effect the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and stop the fighting.”

Haass warned of a public backlash: “Some humanitarian interventions may be warranted. But inconsistency is not cost-free, as it can confuse the American public and disappoint people in other countries, in the process opening us up to charges of hypocrisy and double standards.”

He spoke critically of President Obama’s contention that “it is acceptable in principle to intervene militarily on behalf of interests deemed less than vital” and to wage “wars of choice.” Haass said such wars could be justified, but they were clearly illegal.

Addressing how the war might be won, he said Obama “is clearly looking to our partners in NATO to assume the major military role and has ruled out the introduction of American ground forces.” But, he stressed, the record to date pointed to an escalation of US involvement. The no-fly zone was quickly augmented by “additional air operations designed to degrade Libyan government forces... Now there is apparent interest in arming opposition forces.”

Haass concluded: "The only way to ensure the replacement of the current Libyan regime with something demonstrably better would be through the introduction of ground forces that were prepared to remain in place to maintain order and build capacities in the aftermath of ousting the government." He opposed such a course, arguing for a "diplomatic initiative" to bring about a ceasefire.

Dirk Vandewalle, author of *A History of Modern Libya* and professor at Dartmouth College, was pro-regime change. But his comments on the potentially ruinous impact of the war were revealing nonetheless. Libya has suffered terrible damage, he said, and there was a clear danger that it might "descend into a true civil war that would pit the western and eastern provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica against each other."

He warned against "unconditionally supporting" the opposition Transitional National Council. "Despite the claims that it represents the entire country," he said, "the [TNC] so far is national once more only in its aspirations."

He continued: "Only roughly 12 of its members are known. The remainder, claimed to geographically represent the rest of the country, are kept secret for alleged fear of retaliation by Gaddafi. Not surprising, in light of Gaddafi's policies, none is a truly national figure who can command allegiance in all provinces and across all tribes."

It was left to the liberal interventionists to line up behind the Republican neo-cons as the most fervent advocates of the war in Libya. Tom Malinowski, Washington director of Human Rights Watch, boasted of his organisation's activities on the ground in Libya, working with forces "who have since risen to prominence in the opposition."

He opposed any critical approach to the opposition, even declaring that "what we have seen unfold in Libya is not, as some have suggested, a classic civil war." Arguing against Haass, he insisted that intervention had indeed prevented a massacre.

"When Qaddafi's forces launched their counter-offensive against the rebels in the east in early March," he said, "we feared that much larger scale atrocities might unfold if they reached the city of Benghazi and other opposition-held towns further east. But the Obama administration and its international allies acted soon enough to prevent this from happening."

Turning to the question of Libyan rebel arms ending up in the hands of Islamic extremists, he said this was a "legitimate" concern, but added, "In our experience, the vast majority of people in this part of Libya want nothing to do with terrorism."

The push to expand Western military intervention on the ground in Libya, despite an injunction in Security Council Resolution 1973 barring occupation troops, is gaining strength in Britain as well as in the US. In an article published Friday, the *Daily Mail* cited leading military figures who have proposed that Prime Minister David Cameron engage mercenaries "to train and lead the opposition forces towards the capital Tripoli in a battle to end the military stalemate."

The *Daily Mail* wrote: "'It's clear that we can't win the war from the air,' an impeccable military source said yesterday. 'We will hit targets from the air and they [mercenaries] will do the work on the ground.'"

"Arab countries would also pay for ex-Special Air Service men and former US Special Forces

soldiers working for private security firms to train and lead the opposition forces. While serving SAS and Special Boat Service men would not be formally attached to the rebels, dozens could be given extended leave—allowing them to take lucrative private work fighting in Libya. They would act as forward air controllers, calling in allied air strikes to clear a path for a rebel advance to Tripoli.”

The *Daily Mail* argued that inconvenient provisions of Security Council Resolution 1973 could easily be circumvented. It wrote: “Attorney General Dominic Grieve told a National Security Council meeting last month that the UK could justify assistance and even weapons to the rebels if it could be shown that they were helping to save civilian lives. The same would apply to small numbers of personnel as long as they did not constitute an ‘occupation force.’”

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