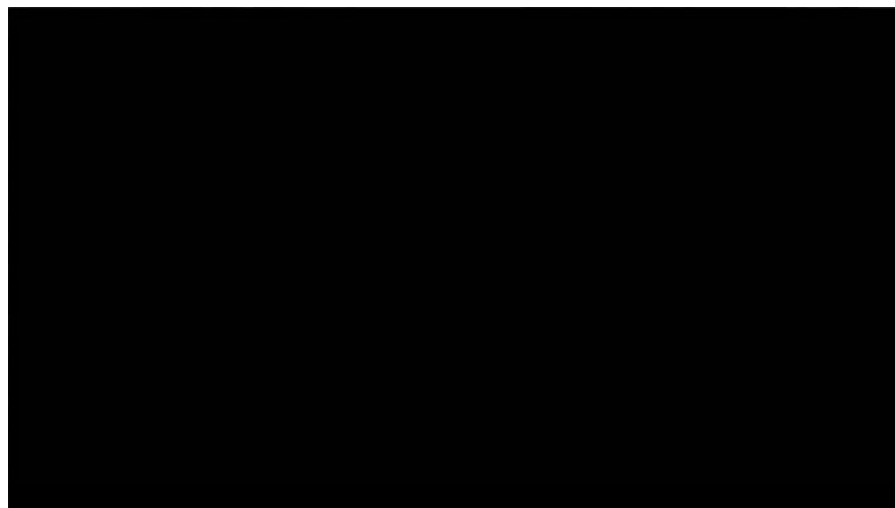


# President Obama Authorizes Covert Help for Libyan Rebels

March 30, 2011

By JAKE TAPPER, JON KARL and RUSSELL GOLDMAN

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President Obama has a signed a secret presidential finding authorizing covert operations to aid the effort in Libya where rebels are in full retreat despite air support from U.S. and allied forces, a source tells ABC News.

The presidential finding discusses a number of ways to help the opposition to Moammar Gadhafi, authorizing some assistance now and setting up a legal framework for more robust activities in the future.

The finding does not direct covert operatives to provide arms to the rebels immediately, although it does prepare for such a contingency and other contingencies should the president decide to go down that road in the future.

The White House press office issued a statement saying it does not comment on intelligence matters.

"I will reiterate what the President said yesterday – no decision has been made about providing arms to the opposition or to any group in Libya. We're not ruling it out or ruling it in," the statement said. "We're assessing and reviewing options for all types of assistance that we could provide to the Libyan people."

The revelation of the finding comes as Washington is debating whether to arm the rag tag army trying to oust Libya's long time strongman Moammar Gadhafi.

The U.S. has led a coalition of allies enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya and hitting Libyan artillery and armor. Despite the allied muscle, the rebels are now being chased by Gadhafi's forces. To make it harder to identify them from the air, his troops have left behind their tanks and are using pickup trucks armed with heavy weapons, making them hard to distinguish from the rebels.

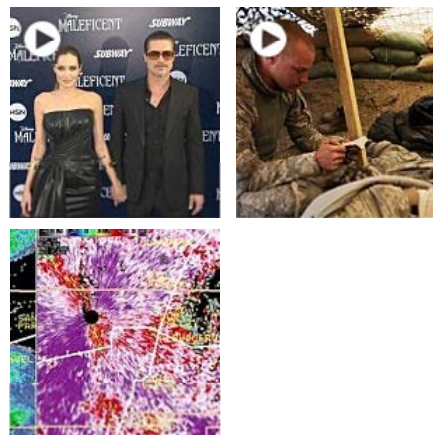
Earlier this week, Obama declined in an interview with ABC News anchor Diane Sawyer to rule out arming the Libyan insurgents. When asked by Sawyer whether he would consider sending weapons to the rebels, Obama said, "We are examining all options to support the opposition."

White House spokesman Jay Carney repeated echoed Obama today saying the president is

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"not ruling something in or ruling something out in terms of lethal assistance to the opposition... We're coordinating with the opposition and exploring ways that we can assist them with nonlethal assistance. And we'll look at other possibilities of assistance as we move forward.

Rep. Mike Rogers, head of the House Intelligence Committee, warned the Obama administration against sending arms to the Libyan insurgents.

"It's safe to say what the rebels stand against," Rogers, R-Mich. said. "But we are a long way from an understanding of what they stand for. We don't have to look very far back in history to find examples of the unintended consequences of passing out advanced weapons to a group of fighters we didn't know as well as we should have."

"We need to be very careful before rushing into a decision that could come back to haunt us," Rogers said.

Those wary of arming the Libyan opposition cite several reservations.

The U.N. resolution that authorized airstrikes also embargoes weapon shipments to Libya. But Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has suggested that the embargo on weapons likely applies only to those sold to the government.

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Some are also leery about arming a disparate rebel army with no clear leadership, no clear agenda, and comprised of fighters potentially driven more by loyalty to tribe than country.

In addition, there are allegations that some of the rebel fighters have ties to militant Islamist groups al Qaeda and Hezbollah.

"We don't know as much as we would like to know and as much as we expect we will know," Clinton said Tuesday after meeting with opposition leader Mahmoud Jibril. "We're picking up information."

In a speech Monday, President Obama said protecting civilians from near certain genocide and not ousting Gadhafi was the intended purpose of the U.S. air strikes that started two weeks ago.

Arming the rebels could become necessary, said Mark Quarterman, director of the Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to prevent a rebel route and to defend civilians, or if Obama's policy was altered to include regime change in Libya.

"The rebels are under-gunned and outmanned by the professional soldiers of the Gadhafi regime," said Quarterman. "The rebels would have to get better and bigger weapons."

But so far the rebels have not proved they're a capable fighting force.

"The end of the mission is tied in many ways to effectiveness of the rebels, rebels, who we don't know anything about and are not showing themselves to be extremely effective," said Quarterman.

The U.S. has in several foreign conflicts supported rebel groups against communists and dictators only to find that the groups bring with them news instability and violence.

Most poignantly were the Afghan mujahedeen, armed and funded by the U.S. in the 1980s in their fight against the Soviets, only to become a core element of Al Qaeda.

In Nicaragua in 1980s, U.S.-backed Contras paid to attack the communist regime instead attacked and tortured innocent civilians.

In 1986, President Reagan back Jonas Savimbi, an anti-communist guerilla, in a bloody war in Angola, only to watch him massacre thousands in a decades-long civil war.


A 2007 study from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point looked at 595 fighters who entered Iraq to fight against the U.S. Almost 19 percent came from Libya.

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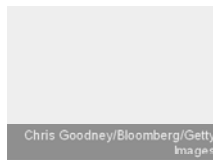
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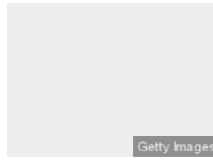
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