

Italy Considers US Request to Use Sicily Air Base for Bombing Strikes against Libya

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The Italian foreign ministry says the country's government would "consider" opening up its Sigonella military air base in Sicily in order to allow US jets to hit Islamic State militants in Libya, should Washington approach the government.

"Should there be requests, we will consider them," Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni told journalists on Tuesday. The Italian government won't need any backing from parliament on the issue, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters. However, Rome has reportedly not yet received such a request.

Since Monday, US fighter jets have been targeting Islamic State targets around the group's key stronghold in Libya, the coastal city of Sirte. The bombardment, approved by US President Barack Obama, followed an earlier request for US support from the Libyan UN-backed Unity government.

Reacting to this latest action Paolo Gentiloni welcomed the air strikes. "I believe that it's a very positive fact," he told RAI TV as quoted by AP.

The Sigonella Air Base, home to both Italian and US Air Force units, is already part of the campaign against the jihadists in Libya. In February, Italy gave the green light to the launch of US drones from the site. However, at the time, Rome denied any use of the airbase for "offensive" purposes.

Referring to the latest air strikes against Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) in Libya, the Italian foreign minister added that it sent a "very strong message not only against terrorism, but also for the stabilization of Libya."

Libya, devastated by years of civil war and the rise of terrorism after a NATO-backed intervention and ousting of its leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, lies just 450 kilometers from Italy's southern coast.

Monday's US bombardment was lauded by Libya's UN-backed government. Fayez Serraj, the head of the Libyan presidency council reacted by saying the strikes already caused "major casualties" among terrorists.

However experts cast doubts on the aims of the latest US campaign in Libya. "US policy has been the complete destruction of Libya," Sara Flounders, an American anti-war activist told RT.

Flounders went on to say that it was essentially Washington who turned Libya “into a howling wasteland” and that the current government in Tripoli is a “gang willing to make a deal with the US”.The activist in addition pointed out the risks to civilian casualties posed by US action. “It will create - as it is creating right now in Syria - far more civilian casualties, far more destruction of the infrastructure that is remaining in Libya,” she added.

In February US fighter jets destroyed an IS training camp near Libya’s coastal city of Sabratha. While aiming at a suspected mastermind of deadly terror attacks on tourists in Tunisia in 2015, the bombardment also resulted in civilian deaths. Serbian officials later confirmed that two Serbian diplomats, held hostage by the jihadists, had been killed in the air strike.

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