

## Libya: A solution worse than the problem?

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As the crisis in Libya unfolds and as the US, France and the UK get potentially sucked ever deeper into yet another disastrous military intervention, policy debates and decisions appear to be driven primarily by humanitarian concern. Unsurprisingly, supporters and opponents alike use the humanitarian argument – one side seeks to stop a murderous dictator from slaughtering his own people, the other is concerned about the inevitable civilian casualties and ‘collateral damage’ caused by airstrikes, no matter how sophisticated the military technology behind them might be.

While there can be little doubt that the UN Security Council Resolution provides legal cover for the airstrikes and while protecting fellow human beings is unquestionably an honourable motive, what gets lost in this debate, for the most part, is a consideration of the wider and longer-term consequences of what are for all intents and purposes Western airstrikes against an Arab Muslim country.

Estimating longer-term implications of particular actions (or lack thereof) is always guess-work, so by necessity one has to look at precedents. Many invoke the international community’s failure in Rwanda in the first half of the 1990s as the relevant scenario, but how likely is another genocide of similar proportions. Gaddafi is a brutal dictator, but is he a genocidal maniac?

Other precedents spring to mind, however. In Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979, the US and others, supported the mujahidin: a decades-long civil war ensued that created the Taliban regime and a breeding ground for al-Qaeda. This is not a straightforward chain of cause and effect, but unintended consequences in similar cases are anything but few and far between. In Kosovo in the late 1990s, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was massively supported to help in ousting Milosevic – few years earlier it had been denounced as nothing but an organised crime network; a few years later, serious questions about the organisation and some of its members remain. During the Cold War period, East and West alike backed questionable regimes in pursuit of geopolitical aims. Do we know enough about the opposition movement in Libya to be sure that strengthening their hand in toppling the Gaddafi regime will not have consequences of yet unclear nature and implications?

Another consideration has to be the signal that the intervention in Libya sends. On the one hand, there is a moral hazard problem here: does intervention encourage more uprisings elsewhere in the hope that the international community will back protesters (provided they frame their demands in language that is palatable to their would-be backers inside and outside the UN Security Council), and is there the will and capacity to do so? But the problems do not stop there. Even though in the case of Libya a Security Council resolution was achieved at remarkable speed, it still takes time to get it approved and it takes time to get sufficient military assets in place – time that cannot but intensify fighting on the ground between what are poorly matched forces. In other words, the looming threat of another intervention might perversely create the opposite of its intended effect: a massive and irreversible regime crack-down on the very protesters that are meant to benefit from international action. Likewise, how should one interpret the deployment of Saudi and UAE forces to Bahrain if not as a preventive measure against a similar intervention, strengthening an incumbent regime that has become more and more brutal in its repression of the protest movement.

Current events in Yemen, however, could be seen as positive fallout from the intervention in Libya. Perhaps fearing similarly decisive steps, not least after France demanded that President Saleh step down, shifting allegiances within the military and major tribes may well bring to an end Saleh’s three-decade rule, but, much like in Egypt, it remains to be seen whether this will indeed usher in real democratic change, let alone a more stable and secure Yemen. Challenged by both separatists in the south and rebels in the north, the home base of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and economically heavily dependent on decreasing hydrocarbon resources, Yemen has been on the brink of state failure and disintegration for some time and regime change alone (which is not necessarily equivalent to a transition to democracy) is unlikely to be a cure for the country’s many problems.

All of this assumes, of course, that enforcing the no-fly zone over Libya ‘by all necessary means’ is indeed successful (in doing what is not entirely clear either: stopping an ensuing civil war, removing Gaddafi, establishing democracy?). But what if it is not? What if Gaddafi’s forces prevail and defeat the opposition movement? What if a stalemate emerges and with it a protracted civil war? How much political resolve and capacity will the US, France and the UK bring to bear and with what consequences? The Arab League is already wavering in its support, Russia has condemned as disproportionate the military campaign so far, and the West, in particular the European Union, is far from united in its support for the intervention. The fault lines may be different than they were over the Iraq war less than a decade ago, but they are hardly less relevant.

Then, as much as now, the real question is the extent to which Western policy has been fully thought through in all its consequences and whether appropriate contingency plans are in place. As long as this is not clear, the ‘solution’ currently contemplated for Libya could still be worse than the problem it seeks to address.

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