

[Why No "No-fly" Zone for Libya](#)

Paris, March 11, 2011 – To intervene in another country's internal conflict has always posed a prudential judgement, weighing one's own national interest, alliances, treaty obligations, the international balance and international law. The twentieth century has greatly complicated the matter by adding to this combination humanitarian convictions and considerations, mainly inspired by the modern experience of deliberate atrocity and ideologically motivated genocide in and since the second world war.

Humanitarian military intervention in the affairs of another country, as a great many people wish to see happen in support of the Libyan popular rebellion against the grotesque and oppressive dictatorship of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, can be inspired by moral convictions (in this case, more a matter of simple moral outrage inspired by the character of Qaddafi's rule), rooted ultimately in religion or in abstract conceptions of justice, or in established international law or agreement.

It can also be a bloody blunder. Finally, it can disguise a policy of self-interest, greed, political ideology, or exploitation – or be interpreted as such -- as was the case in the American and British-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – although the Soviets were also the victims of American entrapment, as Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in a French magazine in 1998. (This did not prove in the long run to have been a very smart move by America, although as Mr. Brzezinski has explained, it did deal the fatal blow to a moribund Soviet Union. It is also why the U.S. is in Afghanistan today.)

An Egypt ruled by a military elite suited the American interest and that of its Israeli ally until earlier this year not because of any American concern for Egyptian national interest or the Egyptians' well-being, but because it suited Washington (and its European allies) to have Egypt—and Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and the other Muslim states in the region (Iran the self-elected exception) -- politically passive and obedient to the prevailing international economic norms and practices of the western world. That is the way international interest works.

When the Egyptian uprising broke out, following the one in Tunisia, Washington found itself in a dilemma. Its conservative Arab and Israeli allies – far more important to American economic and domestic political interests than Egypt – urged U.S. intervention in the non-humanitarian interest of defending the Hosni Mubarak dictatorship. So did many in Congress, the Pentagon, and American business.

To judge from their public statements, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her special emissary to President Mubarak, Frank Wisner, were supportive of the dictatorship, at least initially. But what was the United States supposed to do? Land the U.S. Marines to impose order in Alexandria and Cairo? That would have been madness. President Barack Obama eventually gave the Egyptian president excellent advice: to leave while he still could leave. The alternative would have been what we see now in Libya.

Western opinion currently appears in favor of imposing a "No-Fly" zone to support the uprising. This is understandable. The insurgents want to be free from Colonel Qaddafi's loathsome, fantasy-laden

and brutal rule. We wish them success. However overt military intervention would transform a civil conflict into a war between the existing Libyan government and the West – the U.S., NATO, Europe.

The essence of the general Arab uprising is that it has been popular, authentic, spontaneous, democratic, and (with respect to established international political and economic interests) disinterested. This has been its marvel, and the source of its strength. It has been unique. An overt foreign military intervention threatens to discredit all that, undermining the essential quality of the Arab Revolution.

In addition, although it may seem heartless to say this, the Arab uprising is not our affair, and we should stay away from it. It is theirs, and they must do with it what they wish if they are to maintain their self-respect, their newly-achieved power, and their ability to go forward from here to bring deep renewal to their cultural world.

The civil struggle in Libya is not merely Qadaffi versus the people, but an affair of the tribal attachments of an Arab and Berber population, whose separate regions (in modern times Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan), were under Ottoman domination from the sixteenth century forward, and were not united until the twentieth century, and separatism undoubtedly persists even now. Western policy planners, military men, and even humanitarian enthusiasts, do well not to blunder into things they know nothing about. Readers may recall that George W. Bush, having eagerly invaded the Muslim world, had to be sat down and have explained to him the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and why this implied that he was handing Iraq over to predominantly Iranian influence.

Moreover, military intervention is highly destructive. A “No-Fly” zone sounds sensible and prudent, but the United States (as Robert Gates has warned Washington) does not intervene anywhere without first suppressing all possible defensive threats to American forces. Hence a NATO or U.S no-fly zone would be preceded by days if not weeks of systematic bombardment of Libyan defensive sites, inevitably located near cities and oil installations, with much “collateral damage” and many civilian casualties. It is not a humanitarian policy.

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