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Libya: Resisting the Siren Call of Creeping Intervention

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Washington and its NATO allies [have bungled the Libya crisis](#). Unless they change course, they face endless entanglement in an interminable civil war in North Africa. The only worse option would be to double down and escalate.

Allied intervention in Libya makes no sense. No security issues of note are at issue. Libya is only a modest oil producer and Western military action does not guarantee stability. In fact, tepid U.S. and European intervention has deepened and prolonged the crisis. Even if the Europeans felt their stake in Libya's strife to be significant, Washington had no reason to get involved.

President Barack Obama's professed humanitarian case is weak: Muammar Gaddafi is an autocratic thug, but no more so today than last year, when he fêted by the West for having abandoned terrorism and proliferation. The developing civil war was awful because there was combat, not because there was genocide. Gaddafi's blood-curdling rhetoric was not implemented when he previously recaptured rebellious cities. And the allies shamelessly ignore repression and bloodshed elsewhere when it suits them, which is often.

Almost as bad as an unnecessary war is a bungled war. The allies purport to be protecting civilians, but have been trying to oust Gaddafi on the cheap. Despite insistent cries that the Libyan tyrant must go, [the U.S. and other NATO members refuse to devote the forces necessary to defenestrate him](#). Led by France and Britain, the alliance has saved the opposition from defeat, but not enabled it to win. The result has been a longer conflict, which has led to more casualties, both combatants and civilians. And no end is in sight.

At last week's NATO foreign minister summit, British and French officials cut pitiful figures, begging the other 26 members to lend them a few planes to fight their war. But they were turned down by everyone, including Washington. Nicolas Bonaparte Sarkozy has been threatening every Arab ruler but lacks the weapons and munitions to defeat just Gaddafi. The heirs to Churchill in London have overstretched what is now a second-division power and risk dropping it another level. Still, Britain began stretching those resources even more, targeting Qaddafi's communication networks.

All the governments in America, France, and Britain could agree on [was a joint newspaper op-ed](#), proclaiming unity and steadfastness while failing to set a coherent objective or explain who would provide the means necessary to achieve whatever the ultimate end. At least failure matters little to the U.S., which has largely abandoned ongoing operations. But the Europeans face far greater public embarrassment and geopolitical harm.

As a result, the mission is creeping upward as pressure increases on the allies to do more. France wants to rewrite United Nations Resolution 1973 to authorize expanded military operations, but in this campaign Paris is a bandwagon of one. Such an effort might not even win a majority of Security Council votes, let alone escape a Russian veto. Anyway, approving another piece of paper won't add any military forces to the allied effort.

With the search for additional airpower looking to be a dead end, the Siren Call of ground troops beckons. Already Special Forces from various nations are thought to be operating in Libya. France and Britain have just announced that they are taking a second step: sending military advisers to assist the rebels. Italy is contributing *ten* instructors as well.

At the moment the objective is limited. London said that its "military liaison advisory team" won't even train rebel soldiers. However, [British MP Sir Menzies Campbell warned](#) that sending advisers "must not be seen as a first installment of further military deployment. Vietnam began with a U.S. president sending military advisers."

The Obama administration declined to join the advisory project, but has announced the provision of \$25 million worth of "non-lethal" military supplies. Capitol Hill advocates of arming the rebels say the door is now open for weapons transfers.

Moreover, the European Union, separate from NATO, has indicated its willingness to undertake a military mission, [EURFOR Libya](#), to provide humanitarian aid, if requested by the United Nations. In theory it's another limited operation, but this proposal could easily lead to geographic "safe havens" guarded by allied troops, as advocated by former British Foreign Secretary David Owens.

[Warned Simon Tisdall in the Guardian](#): "the creep is on."

Alas, half steps are unlikely to defeat Gaddafi. The opposition faces a number of debilitating internal challenges. For instance, two of the top military commanders are currently waging a messy and public struggle for control. An opposition victory looks far away.

Stalemate will increase the temptation to initiate a ground assault. [British Gen. Lord Dannatt, former British army head, dismissed concerns](#) over creeping escalation: "Some will always say 'mission creep,' but [Britain should] interpret the UN mandate broadly to avoid mission collapse."

What if the only way to prevent "mission collapse" is to introduce ground forces? The Misrata Judicial Committee has formally requested an allied invasion of their beleaguered city in Libya's west. "We need a force from NATO or the United Nations on the ground now," [explained committee member Nouri Abdullah Abdulati](#).

Two weeks ago [U.S. Gen. Carter Ham testified](#) before the Senate Armed Services Committee: "I suspect there might be some consideration" of using American ground forces. So far the secretary of defense, vice president, and president have dismissed that option. Are they prepared for either

endless stalemate or embarrassing withdrawal?

The allies appear to believe that time is on their side. But there is no evidence that Gaddafi is ready to flee or about to be deposed. The Clinton administration took the same approach against Serbia in 1999: drop a few bombs and Slobodan Milosevic will surrender. That air campaign went on for 78 days before he made a deal and forced concessions in the ultimatum originally presented by Washington. Had the allies made regime change their objective, the war would have gone on much longer.

To avoid another Kosovo, [Michael Hirsh of the *National Journal*](#) advocated that President Barack Obama toss aside his earlier promise and "consider ground troops." [Anthony Cordesman of CSIS proposed](#) an even more dramatic escalation, though without ground forces.


[Wrote Cordesman](#): "France, Britain, the U.S. and other participating members of the Coalition need to shift to the kind of bombing campaign that targets and hunts down Qaddafi's military and security forces in their bases and as they move -- as long before they engage rebel forces as possible." Moreover, added Cordesman, "Hard, and sometimes brutal, choices need to be made between limited civilian casualties and collateral damage during the decisive use of force and an open-ended war of attrition."


Hirsh's and Cordesman's advice makes a certain sense -- but only if there is no alternative to war in Libya. To his credit, [Vice President Joseph Biden dismissed](#) the argument that only America can resolve the Libyan crisis: "it is bizarre to suggest that NATO and the rest of the world lacks the capability to deal with Libya -- it does not." The problem, he said, was will, not capacity.


There is an even more important point. The stakes do not warrant escalation. The vice president pointed to America's strategic concerns elsewhere, including next door in Egypt. Libya barely registers. Nothing there warrants Washington's involvement.

Indeed, U.S. involvement in this conflict is simply stupid. The stakes are minimal, the objectives are confused, the benefits are negligible, the resources are inadequate, the costs are excessive, and the consequences are dangerous. A month ago the president was right to reject the use of ground forces. Today he should end U.S. participation in Libya's civil war.





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