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Libya: Another Unnecessary War Of Choice

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Eight years after invading Iraq, U.S. forces remain on station. Nearly a decade after ousting the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, Washington is more deeply involved than ever. Yet the architects of these interminable wars are lobbying to embark on another military adventure in Libya.

The U.S. government long has been tempted to meddle in other nations' affairs — and rarely to good results. It is difficult to transcend history, ethnicity, culture, religion, tradition and geography to "fix" other countries. Iraq dramatically demonstrated that social engineering through war is even harder.

The protests sweeping the Arab world offer hope of liberty for tens of millions of people long subjugated by a variety of kleptocratic autocracies. But revolutions sometimes yield worse repression. Washington also worries about the rise of anti-American radicalism.

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Libya appears to be an easy case, since Muammar al-Gadhafi long was hostile to the U.S. Thus, the Washington *commentariat*, the famed “Sofa Samurai” who cheer on wars in which they do not fight, is now demanding action against Gadhafi.

Although protestors quickly overran most of eastern Libya, the regime rallied in the capital of Tripoli. Better armed than the insurgents, Gadhafi’s forces shot down demonstrators and bombed opposition areas. The regime has regained some lost territory, leading to fears of protracted conflict, even civil war.

The Libyan crisis is a tragedy, but is important to America only in the usual Washington game of threat inflation. President Barack Obama claimed the Libyan imbroglio posed “an unusual threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” The former is errant nonsense. Libya always has been peripheral to American security, especially after the Gadhafi regime dropped its terrorist attacks and nuclear program. The latter is irrelevant—much of which goes on around the world conflicts with the “foreign policy of the United States.” Neither is cause for war.

The [Weekly Standard’s Lee Smith](#) complained that a Libyan civil war “would destabilize Africa as well as other Arab states, and cause considerable damage to American prestige and influence.” Actually, Africa has been routinely “destabilized” by far larger conflicts with little impact beyond. It is unrest in other Arab states, most notably Libya’s neighbors, Tunisia and Egypt, which triggered resistance to the Gadhafi government, not the other way around.

Moreover, the conflict in Libya is irrelevant to “American prestige and influence” unless U.S. policymakers foolishly put that prestige and influence at risk. In fact, [Michael Brenner](#) of the University of Pittsburgh makes just such a bootstrap argument in *The Huffington Post*: “Great powers don’t have the privilege of declaring a situation intolerable and then doing nothing to rectify it when they in fact have the power to do so.”

Actually, being a great power, indeed, the world’s sole superpower, allows Washington to do precisely that. If Americans had to spill blood every time their leaders made intemperate, even stupid statements, the nation never would be at peace.

Finally, there is much demand for “leadership.” But real leadership incorporates prudence, and especially a willingness to set priorities.

It doesn’t much matter to Americans who rules Libya. That nation is a major oil producer, but whoever runs the Libyan government will want to sell its most important resource. Protracted conflict might disrupt exports, but that would mean higher prices, not economic collapse, in the West. Keeping gas cheap is among the worst reasons to go to war.

Still, the U.S. probably would be better off with someone other than Gadhafi in power. Only probably, however. American policymakers don’t know who would dominate among the divided and fractious opposition. It may be unlikely that someone worse than Gadhafi would prevail, but history indicates that it is possible.

The best argument for intervening is humanitarian. Rachel Kleinfeld of the Truman National Security Project declared that “[intervention is likely the only moral option](#).” If so, why not intervene elsewhere — against the

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Saudi, Syrian, Iranian or Algerian dictatorships, for instance? And in Ivory Coast, where the outgoing president has stolen an election and killed protestors to stay in power? The demands for action in Libya appear to base foreign policy on CNN, responding to crises which receive the most international media coverage.

The military response du jour is a “no-fly” zone. Retired Air Force Gen. [Merrill McPeak](#) said, “This is a pretty easy problem, for crying out loud.” The U.S. Senate cast a unanimous vote in favor of establishing one. [Giles Merritt](#), an analyst with Security and Defense Agenda, a Belgian think tank, asserted, “There’s no reason not to implement a no-fly zone.”

A no-fly zone combines compelling visuals with minimal risks, at least when used against a marginal power like Libya. But the tactic has a mixed record: little value in the Balkans, largely ineffectual in southern Iraq, more useful when protecting Kurds who had their own military forces.

Moreover, a no-fly zone would be an act of war. Enforcing it with aircraft would require suppression of Libyan air defenses — modest, but perhaps more capable than commonly assumed. Stated Secretary of Defense [Robert Gates](#): “A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya. That’s the way you do a no-fly zone.”

Libya is a large country, stretching more than 1000 miles east to west and containing a dozen major cities. Gen. James Mattis, commander of the U.S. Central Command, said more aircraft would be required than deployed on a single carrier. Washington could rely on ship-to-air and air-to-air missiles, but they would be less effective against low-flying craft. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments figures the cost of a no-fly operation would run up to \$300 million a week for the most extensive aerial coverage.

Gadhafi might succeed in downing U.S. aircraft. After all, the bedraggled Bosnian Serbs were able to shoot down an F-16 in 1995 and the Yugoslav Serbs even downed an F-117 stealth fighter during America’s 1999 bombing campaign. The destruction of American planes and capture of American pilots would create pressure for deeper involvement.

Gadhafi also might look for other means to retaliate, including terrorism. If Gadhafi succeeded in killing Americans, pressure for airstrikes and even an invasion would soar.

Another problem with a no-fly zone would be its limited utility. For instance, Yugoslavia was able to deploy sub-sonic aircraft and helicopters despite the allied no-fly zone in Bosnia.

Ivo Daadler, America’s NATO ambassador, noted: “No-fly zones are more effective against fighters, but they really have a limited effect against ... helicopters or the kind of ground operations that we’ve seen. Which is why a no-fly zone, even if it were to be established, isn’t really going to impact what is happening there today.”

Indeed, Gadhafi may have enough forces on the ground, a mix of paramilitary and elite army, to prevail, or at least to maintain control of the west and significant oil production. Gen. James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, confounded conventional wisdom when he opined that Gadhafi “seems to have staying power” and is likely to “prevail.”

Tepid intervention like a no-fly zone might offer just enough aid to prolong a civil war, causing even more casualties and destruction. Then

the U.S. would have to decide whether to double down, creating a “no-drive” zone for Gadhafi’s tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery, arming the rebels, training insurgent forces, attacking Libyan airfields and air units, inserting Special Forces and/or sending in ground troops. In both the Balkans and Iraq, no-fly zones acted as steps to much more extensive military involvement.

At least Rachel Kleinfeld acknowledges “the likelihood of a long ‘occupation’ of foreign troops” resulting from any serious intervention. However, getting involved in a civil war with 150,000 U.S. troops still stuck in Afghanistan and Iraq would suggest that American policymakers are as nutty as Gadhafi.

And who to back in Libya? Not every opponent of the regime is a nascent Thomas Jefferson. France has recognized the Libyan National Council, the main opposition group. But there is no guarantee that it will govern Libya if Gadhafi falls. Libya’s regional and tribal divisions run deep. Jihadists are active even though they do not predominate. Analyst Alison Pargeter pointed to “the almost complete absence of functioning institutions in Libya,” including even a ruling political party.

Thus, Gadhafi’s ouster is likely to trigger additional brutal and unpredictable power struggles. Unfortunately, the good guys often lose such post-revolutionary battles. [James Hackett](#) of the International Institute for Strategic Studies observed, “You are probably dealing with a range of different tribes and communities that have very different agendas once Gaddafi goes.”

If the U.S. backs one or another faction, it will own the outcome. Which will force American policymakers to choose winners and losers, manipulate political actors, and otherwise meddle endlessly in Libya for years to come.

How the Libyan people would respond to U.S. or Western intervention is not clear. Some want a no fly zone or even air strikes, though many insist on UN approval. Others reject any outside intervention, even suggesting that they would oppose foreign troops as well as Gadhafi’s minions. American intervention would risk discrediting friendly forces in any succeeding power struggle.

Nor is it clear how U.S. action would be perceived elsewhere. Washington has a well-earned reputation for supporting and ousting regimes to serve its interests and not those of subject peoples. George W. Bush’s freedom initiative is not why the Arab street is now rising against its oppressors, mostly governments long backed by Washington.

[Daniel Pipes](#) points out in *The National Review* that so far the U.S. has been “conspicuously absent from the sloganeering” in the Middle East uprisings. Yes, because Washington has not been directly involved. Intervening in Libya would change that dynamic. Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) emphasizes the importance of winning international support for military action, preferably from the United Nations, but the latter remains unlikely due to Russian opposition. Relying on NATO or the EU would be correctly seen as mere American fig leaves.

[Dov Zakheim](#) complained that the alternative to acting “is to sit back and let events dictate what the United States should do.” Stephen Grand of the Brookings Institution claimed “doing nothing is not a viable alternative.” Sen. John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, opined that the U.S. “should not be on the sidelines.”

Actually, that is precisely where Washington should be. Peace should be America’s default position. Obviously, there are times when war is tragically necessary. That is not the case in Libya.

Even in better economic times, Washington cannot afford to police the world. With a \$1.65 trillion deficit this year, trillions of dollars in red ink expected in coming decades, and over \$100 trillion in unfunded liabilities piled high, the U.S. government needs to relearn humility in foreign policy, as candidate George W. Bush argued so very long ago.

More fundamentally, the lives and treasure of Americans, especially those in the armed forces, should not be risked without something important at stake for their own society. Military personnel are not gambit pawns to be sacrificed in some global chess game played by ivory tower warriors. For good reason nearly two-thirds of Americans say they want to stay out of Libya.

We should wish the Libyan people well. But their war is not our war. And military intervention risks their future. Wrote [Gideon Rachman](#) in the *Financial Times*: “in the long-run, it would damage the only real chance for lasting peace and stability in the region—the hope that the future of the Middle East will now be determined by ordinary citizens, rather than by local dictators or outside powers.”

President Bush’s militaristic agenda was never necessary. Democracy is spreading in spite of catastrophic policy failure in Iraq. [Andrew Bacevich](#) of Boston University noted in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* that, “by liberating themselves, [the Muslim masses] will also liberate us. Our misbegotten crusade to determine their destiny will finally end.” Americans should reject another war of choice in another Muslim nation about which they know nothing.

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