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Editorial: Key questions about a Libya no-fly zone

America must carefully scrutinize military options.

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Star Tribune Editorial

Global revulsion over Moammar Gadhafi's use of force against Libyan citizens has understandably led to calls for international intervention.

President Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron, among others, have called for consideration of every diplomatic and military option.

International condemnation, an arms embargo and freezing of assets have hemmed in Gadhafi diplomatically. But ultimately, force may decide who rules Libya.

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"The danger is that we can be seen as trying to hijack the Libyan uprising for our own purposes."



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To hasten regime change, **some have called** for the U.S. to impose a no-fly zone over the country, similar to ones America's military enforced in Iraq and the Balkans.

We said in an earlier editorial that such a step should be considered. That means answering a number of key, and difficult, questions:

- *Do we know what we're getting into?* A no-fly zone is more than patrolling the skies. Air defense systems would need to be disabled first. Many of them are mobile; Gadhafi could, and quite possibly would, place them next to mosques, hospitals or schools, increasing the probability of civilian casualties.

- *Would a no-fly turn the tide of the conflict?* It may help convince Gadhafi loyalists to switch sides, as many already have done. But it may not stop the killing. Gadhafi has shown a willingness to use armor and artillery in lieu of aircraft. U.S. pilots might be forced to keep Libyan aircraft grounded while ignoring tanks on their way kill protesters.

- *Who are the anti-Gadhafi forces?* Years of repression have retarded development of legitimate opposition groups. So while nearly any alternative would be better than the terrorist Gadhafi, little is known about who would replace him. Given the tribal nature of Libya and the risk of radicals

TED GALEN CARPENTER, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute

...

"The likely cost and consequences of a U.S. intervention to remove Gadhafi from power are significantly more destabilizing to international security and peace than a currently contained civil war in Libya."

MICAH ZENKO, fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations

...

"The danger is that of mission creep, and getting sucked into the conflict."

MARINA OTTAWAY, director, Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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filling the void, this is no small matter.

- *Would U.S intervention taint the opposition?* Gadhafi already claims, absurdly, that the conflict is about imperialists coveting Libyan oil. Would U.S. action make the anti-Gadhafi forces appear beholden to the West, and thus robbed of legitimacy in Libyans' eyes?

- *Does a no-fly zone have international legitimacy?* The Arab League has called for a no-fly zone, but getting United Nations Security Council approval would be more difficult, given Russia's and China's veto power. Most important to our war-weary nation: Must it always be America that takes the lead?

- *What signals would this send?* The political awakening sweeping North Africa and the Middle East is exhilarating confirmation of the universal desire for freedom. Obama has rightly expressed our solidarity with it.

But if we intervene militarily in Libya, will dissenters in Bahrain, Yemen and several other countries expect us to act on their behalf as well? Conversely, if the international community does nothing, will every repressive regime learn that it's best to smother peaceful protest with immediate, indiscriminate violence?

- *Is this in our national interest?* The humanitarian grounds for action are clear. But, tragically, crimes against humanity have, and are, taking place in other countries. Do we have any more of a moral imperative to save Libyans from a homicidal dictator than we do citizens in Sudan, Ivory Coast and other nations?

- *How far are we willing to go?* The unexpected always happens in war. Once we commit to air combat, are we willing to follow up with ground forces if necessary? And once we're successful, do we have the will and capacity to see another nation-building project through, despite the enormous difficulties we already face in Iraq and Afghanistan?

The world would be better without Gadhafi leading Libya. But these and many other crucial questions need to be asked before committing our most precious resource -- American lives.

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A deliberate debate is not a sign of weakness, but of wisdom.

* * *

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