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Another War of Choice

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Given the UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of all appropriate measures against Muammar Qaddafi's forces, it is now probable that the United States and its NATO allies (possibly with token commitments from some members of the Arab League) will initiate a military intervention in Libya at some point. The hasty cease-fire that the Qaddafi government announced following passage of the resolution is not likely to alter that policy trajectory for long.

Trenchant critics [have](#)^[3] [presented](#)^[4] [numerous](#)^[5] [valid](#)^[6] [objections](#)^[7] to a Western intervention, starting with pointing out the absurdity of President Obama's assertion that the events in that country pose an "unusual and severe" threat to America's security and interests. The reality is that it would be hard to find a situation that is less relevant to America's genuine interests. Libya is a small country with little political or strategic impact beyond its borders. And Qaddafi, despite his many odious qualities, gave up both his involvement with terrorist ventures and his embryonic nuclear program years ago. Although the country is a mid-sized oil producer, instability there has had only a modest impact on global oil markets. There is neither a strategic

nor an economic justification for a U.S.-led military crusade.

Other advocates of caution have warned that even the imposition of a no-fly zone—to say nothing of the more robust, and highly probable, option of air strikes on Libyan military targets—could ^[8] lead ^[9] to a much deeper and protracted mission. Finally, opponents of America's new looming war note that the United States is already overcommitted, both militarily ^[10] and financially ^[11], in such places as Iraq and Afghanistan. A nation running a \$1.5 trillion federal budget deficit this year should not be looking for new ways to spend money—especially on yet another unnecessary “war of choice.”

But there are also less obvious traps lurking for the United States and its allies in a Libyan intervention. One is that even well-intentioned interference on behalf of the rebels is likely to raise suspicions in that country and throughout much of the Muslim world that Washington is trying to hijack the Libyan uprising for its own purposes ^[12]. Given America's woeful reputation among Muslim populations ^[13], such accusations are inevitable and are likely to be believed. Although the Arab League's endorsement of a no-fly zone may marginally mitigate those suspicions, it will not eliminate them. Indeed, the “Arab street” tends to regard many of the regimes represented in the Arab League as little more than Washington's stooges. Allegations of American imperialism and European neocolonialism will not be long in coming once the intervention takes place. That miasma will linger even if the Western powers manage to keep their commitment not to put boots on the ground in this mission—a degree of restraint that is by no means certain.

Finally, the United States and its allies are wandering into a murky political and demographic minefield in Libya. Western media and policy types have a fuzzy image of the rebels as brave, democratic insurgents determined to liberate the country from a brutal tyrant. But there are other, perhaps far more important, elements involved. Libya itself is yet another fragile, artificial political entity that the European colonial powers created. Italy cobbled together three disparate provinces to establish its Libyan colony. Those areas consisted of Cyrenaica in the east (centered around the cities of Benghazi and Tobruk), Tripolitania in the west (centered around Tripoli, which became the colonial capital), and less populous and less important Fezzan in the south-southwest.

The key point is that the various tribes inhabiting Cyrenaica and Tripolitania had almost nothing in common. Indeed, they sometimes had an adversarial relationship. Yet, when the victorious Allied powers took control of Libya from Italy during and after World War II, they maintained this unstable amalgam instead of separating it into its more cohesive constituent parts.

That is not merely a matter of historical interest. The sharp divide between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania persisted after Libya became independent, and it persists to this day. It is no coincidence that the current uprising against the Qaddafi regime began in the east, with rebel forces quickly seizing Benghazi and other cities in Cyrenaica. Virtually all previous (unsuccessful) anti-regime movements began in the same region. Qaddafi is from Tripolitania and has long depended on western tribes and his western-dominated security forces as his power base. And as easily as rebel demonstrators and troops seized major targets in the east, they predictably faltered as they pressed deeper into Tripolitania.

The agenda of the rebels remains uncertain, but the two leading possibilities both pose major problems for the United States and its allies as they launch their intervention. One possibility is that insurgent leaders want to keep Libya intact and simply reverse the power relationship with their Tripolitanian adversaries. In other words, a victory over the Qaddafi regime would be time for payback. The other possibility is that they wish to split the country and secure independence

for Cyrenaica. There is historical precedent for such an objective. Libya's monarch, King Idris, told the United States and the other Allied powers after World War II that he wished to rule only Cyrenaica, because he thought that trying to control the larger amalgam would be too difficult and lead to dangerous instability [14].

Bush administration leaders greatly underestimated the depth of the divisions among Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, and that blunder contributed greatly to Washington's headaches in that country. The Obama administration may be poised to make a similar blunder in Libya. Assisting the Cyrenaica-based rebels to oust Qaddafi will almost certainly provoke resentment from the people of Tripolitania. If the rebels split the country, that will become a focal point of resentment for those defeated tribes—and a new grievance against the West throughout much of the Muslim world. Even if the rebels attempt to keep Libya intact, the Tripolitanians are bound to resent Washington for their new, subordinate status. Either way, the United States and its allies are in danger of stumbling into a situation in which they are almost certain to acquire new enemies. That is the last thing that America needs.

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[5] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/president-obamas-rhetoric-on-libya/>

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[7] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/14/opinion/14douthat.html?_r=1&adxnl=1&ref=rossdouthat&adxnlx=1300456841-FvXI0nY7kg6mGZUH8RKupQ

[8] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/08/AR2011030803149.html>

[9] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=12849

[10] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/gen-wesley-clark-has-rules-for-us-interventions-libya-doesnt-meet-them/2011/03/09/ABu5jrQ_story.html

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