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Resist Temptation to Intervene in Libya

| [More](#)^[1]

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It's emotionally wrenching to see images of peaceful protesters being gunned down in the streets by Muammar Gaddafi's security forces. The understandable outrage that such sights generate is already leading to calls for international, especially Western, military intervention. Marc Lynch, for example, [advocates](#)^[3]

that among other steps, the United States and NATO should establish a no-fly zone over Libya. Others [4] are [5] calling [6] for similar measures.

That is a spectacularly bad idea. The *American Conservative's* Daniel McCarthy offers an effective rebuttal [7] regarding such schemes. And a no-fly zone might not even have that much impact on the fighting. True, it could prevent the regime from using planes and helicopters to attack anti-government forces. But Gaddafi's goons can inflict a lot of casualties just with rifles and other mundane weapons. A no-fly zone is hardly a panacea for the tragedy in Libya.

Moreover, it comes with a worrisome level of risk. Lynch compares the current bloodletting in Libya to the situations in Bosnia and Kosovo before the U.S.-led interventions in those conflicts. But the aftermath in the Balkans is actually an argument for caution. The no-fly zones helped put the Western powers on a path to becoming responsible for the future of both Bosnia and Kosovo.

And those missions have not turned out well at all. Bosnia is a corrupt, dysfunctional pretend country that is still deeply divided by intractable ethnic hatreds [8]. The situation in Kosovo is even more sobering. Recent revelations show that the Kosovo Liberation Army, which the United States and NATO installed in power, may be even worse than its long-standing reputation as a collection of terrorists and mafia thugs. Mounting evidence indicates [9] that KLA leaders were involved in the sordid harvesting and sale of body organs from murdered civilians and prisoners of war. We cannot be certain about the ultimate nature of the anti-Gaddafi forces that we would be backing in Libya.

But an even more apt model than the Balkans for what interventionists are proposing for Libya is Iraq. The decision to impose no-fly zones in the north and south of that country during the 1990s escalated tensions with Saddam Hussein's regime. Soon, U.S. planes were bombing air fields and other targets to enforce that diktat. Are proponents of establishing a no-fly zone over Libya prepared to have the United States conduct the same kinds of military action? And where might that lead? In Iraq, it led inexorably to a full-fledged invasion and occupation. We are still dealing with the monstrous headache that our military involvement in that country created.

Washington's geostrategic plate is already overflowing just handling the existing messy interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The last thing U.S. policy makers need to do is have this country meddle in Libya. They should resist the siren calls for no-fly zones or other initial steps on what could be a very slippery slope.

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