

The American Conservative

An Ideological War for an Unenforceable Norm

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On March 27, 2011 @ 5:07 pm In

Credibility rationales for wars suffer two crippling deficiencies. First, there is little evidence credibility travels much. Second, even if it did, fighting limited wars of questionable value seems likely to damage one's perceived willingness to fight elsewhere. Western intervention in Libya may encourage Middle-Eastern dictators to crush dissenters rather than accommodate them. ~[Benjamin Friedman](#) ^[1]

Friedman and the others at *National Interest's* [The Skeptics blog](#) ^[2] have been doing great work debunking many of the arguments for the Libyan war. In his latest post, Friedman exposes the emptiness of the core pro-war claims, and he is making an argument very similar to those I have put forward against what we might call the "dictator deterrence" claim. The brutal repression we have been seeing in Syria is currently showing this claim to be false. At present, Syrian security forces have been shooting protesters and killing them by the dozens, and it seems that so long as dictatorships rely on police, irregular militia, and hired thugs to suppress dissent their violence does not cross the arbitrary line that the administration drew in Libya. Dictatorships can adapt to this fairly easily with a combination of regular police brutality and thuggery along the lines of the Basij in Iran.

I hadn't thought of this before, but it occurs to me now that the Libyan intervention is something of a gift for other authoritarian governments. Even more than before, authoritarian governments are going to be able to portray dissenters in their countries as being in league with Western powers, and they will be able to point to Libya's fate as an example of what demands for political reform can cause. While the administration seems to be very keen to align itself with certain popular movements in the region, they are lending credibility to authoritarians' arguments that internal dissent is intended to weaken a country and that dissent invites outside attack.

How better to help authoritarian governments to conflate political opposition with "seditionists," as the Iranian government likes to call Green movement activists, than for Western governments to identify with a political opposition in Libya that is actively engaged in genuine sedition and armed insurrection? This isn't going to fool determined opponents of the regime, but it would probably drive political fence-sitters in these countries towards supporting their regimes. There would then be even more suspicion that protest movements are collaborating with foreign governments or that they serve as unwitting pawns of foreign powers, and a larger percentage of the population will share these suspicions. This is the flip side of the perverse incentive to encourage protest movements to take up arms and start hopeless rebellions. The Libyan war sets several precedents, but there isn't much reason to think that any of them are constructive.

The plunge into Libya has put the U.S. and our allies in a position where they are actually unable to follow through on the implied threat to intervene against other governments that commit atrocities against their population, and the manner in which the administration facilitated and led the Libyan war makes it extremely unlikely that the conditions that made the Libyan war possible can be repeated again.

[This story](#) ^[3] from Bloomberg confirms that:

Clinton said the elements that led to intervention in Libya — international condemnation, an Arab League call for action, a United Nations Security Council resolution — are "not

going to happen” with Syria, in part because members of the U.S. Congress from both parties say they believe Assad is “a reformer.”

That last line raises a question. Suppose that Gaddafi’s son Saif had already been in charge, but responded to protests in Libya more or less exactly as his father did. Would there have been humanitarian interventionists seriously arguing at that point that Saif’s “reformer” credentials ruled out intervention? Last month, Saif’s “reformer” reputation was declared dead as soon as he sided with his father and the regime and against the opposition, so why is Assad’s alleged “reformer” reputation still secure?

One reason why intervention is not going to happen in Syria is that Arab League governments are probably never going to go along with another intervention of this kind ever again. They certainly don’t intend to create a precedent or enforce a “responsibility to protect” norm. Libya is a special case for them. The organization’s internal politics make it unthinkable that they would expel Syria as they did Libya, and without the political cover of Arab League support it is unlikely that there would be an intervention resolution for Russia or China to veto. What that means is that Assad could conceivably carry out another [Hama-style massacre](#) ^[4] that makes anything Gaddafi has done so far pale in comparison, and it would become immediately clear that the “responsibility to protect” doesn’t mean anything. If enforcing the “responsibility to protect” is the ideological reason for the Libyan war, doesn’t it show how pointless the Libyan war is when the administration’s top officials are acknowledging that it is not repeatable?

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URLs in this post:

[1] Benjamin Friedman: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/three-phoney-reasons-bomb-libya-5073>

[2] The Skeptics blog: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics>

[3] This story: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-27/u-s-won-t-intervene-in-syria-unrest-clinton-says-on-cbs.html>

[4] Hama-style massacre: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27diplomacy.html?_r=1&hp

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