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Libya Begets Syria?

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A little over a year ago, as members of the Obama administration were pondering military intervention in Libya, skeptics ([including](#) ^[3] [The](#) ^[4] [Skeptics](#) ^[5]) pressed them to explain how that situation differed from other comparable cases elsewhere in the world. If Libya, why not Yemen? Why not Bahrain? Why not Syria? We may soon learn the answer to that last question. And their too-permissive—or merely haphazard—approach a year ago might pave the way for an intervention in Syria that would be ill-advised, if not disastrous.

At the time of the Libya debate (to the extent that there was one), the president and his foreign-policy advisers [dismissed concerns](#) ^[6] that the intervention in Libya would set a precedent. "It is true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs," President Obama said in a [televised speech to the nation](#) ^[7] on March 28, 2011. But, he continued:

that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right. In this particular country—Libya—at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. . . . To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and, more profoundly, our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are.

At other times, the administration alluded to a loose set of guidelines to explain why it might choose to use force, guidelines which the Libya case met but other cases supposedly did not. These included the likelihood that a large-scale loss of life was imminent; the belief that prompt military action would prevent this violence; and the support of the international community, ideally a formal sanction in the UNSC (absent that, the approval of a regional body, such as the Arab League, might suffice).

Notably absent was sufficient consideration of whether our vital strategic interests were at stake. They were not in Libya, and they are not in Syria.

We should strive to avoid foreign intervention in all but very rare cases. Because getting in is always much harder than getting out, the burden of proof must always be on those making the

case for war, not those advising against.

Beyond that, we must know what mission the U.S. military has been tasked with performing. We must have a reasonable estimate of the likelihood that it will achieve its mission. And we must have some sense of the likely costs in blood and treasure. Finally, we are a nation of laws, not of men—and decidedly not of one man. The president has very little authority to send troops into harm's way, and he has none when U.S. security is not at stake (a criteria that Barack Obama endorsed as a senator but abandoned when he assumed a higher office). If the Obama administration is considering military action to remove Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria, it should obtain formal congressional authorization for such action. And it should do that before going to the United Nations.

No other country is afforded such choices. No other country is able to project power over great distances and on very short notice. No other country has a track record of frequent foreign intervention, even when such operations have no direct connection to advancing our own security. This pattern of behavior constitutes our unique power problem [8]. It is precisely because the United States has used force on numerous occasions over the past two decades that we need a particularly stringent set of criteria governing our future interventions. There is an almost endless parade of aggrieved parties calling on Uncle Sam to save them from harm. And when Washington refuses, or merely drags its heels, they will say: You fought to save Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, why do you then refuse to aid Muslims in Northern Africa or the Levant? The United States must have a ready answer.

But the Obama administration, cheered on or goaded by liberal and neoconservative hawks, does not have one. Yet. And its halting signals are likely to embolden those calling for yet another war.

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[7] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>

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