



Ted Galen Carpenter

Memo to Hawks: Do Libyans a Favor And Don't Do Them Any Favors

The uprisings in the Middle East are proving frustrating for both neoconservatives and liberal hawks. In both Egypt and Tunisia, popular demonstrations quickly forced corrupt tyrants from power before the usual pundits and activists in the United States could make credible cases for military intervention, though they did send aloft a few trial balloons with Egypt. Tunisians and Egyptians achieved their revolutions without the benefit of armed assistance from the West — and are deservedly proud of their achievement.

Ousting Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, however, is proving more difficult and time consuming. So it offers a new opportunity for Americans and other Westerners who suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Interventionist Disorder.

As the armed struggle in Libya escalates, neoconservatives such as Weekly Standard editor William Kristol, foreign policy scholar Robert Kagan and Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), along with liberal proponents of humanitarian intervention including the International Crisis Group's Gareth Evans, are calling for the Obama administration to establish a no-fly zone and take other actions to bring down Qadhafi.

Their ostensible justification is that Qadhafi's security forces are slaughtering demonstrators. While some of the estimates of deaths are probably inflated, it is clear that hundreds have indeed been killed. The stunning images coming out of Libya understandably fuel calls to stop the suffering. But it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the motives of at least some prominent intervention advocates run deeper.

Mixed into the humanitarian justifications are frequent comments about the need to assert U.S. leadership, meaning to try to shape the outcome of the uprising and the political characteristics of a new, post-Qadhafi Libya — and the entire region.

Proponents of intervention seem troubled by the notion that yet another revolution in the Middle East might be a wholly domestic affair — without the benefit of guidance from U.S. political and policy elites.

Actually, that would be a good thing. Given the highly negative opinions of the United States held by people throughout North Africa and the Middle East — U.S. approval ratings are frequently in the 10 percent to 25 percent range — we should be relieved that U.S. conduct has not been a prominent issue in any of the uprisings thus far. That argues for maintaining a low profile and avoiding becoming a source of controversy.

Proposals to intervene in Libya, especially to establish a U.S.-NATO no-fly zone, are misguided for multiple reasons.

First, as we saw in the Balkans and Iraq, no-fly zones tend to lead to deeper and more protracted involvement.

Second, there is considerable opposition throughout the Muslim world to Western meddling. At a recent Arab League meeting, there was a virtual consensus that outside — particularly U.S. — intervention in Libya would be a bad idea.

The foreign minister of Iraq, for example, firmly opposed such action, even as it was clear that his sympathies were with the Libyan insurgents.

The insurgents themselves are reportedly deeply divided about the desirability of aid. Some have called for it. But others emphatically reject it. Their numbers included a faction that displayed for television cameras a large banner proclaiming “No Intervention!”

A final, more subtle, reason that the Obama administration should resist these siren calls from neoconservatives and liberal hawks is that, while such intervention might benefit the insurgents in the short term, it would undermine their legitimacy in the long run.

It would be difficult for factions that asked for and received U.S. military assistance to convince their fellow citizens that they're not Washington's puppets.

Libyans, like Tunisians and Egyptians, need to overthrow their oppressive thug of a ruler through their own exertions. One Tripoli demonstrator put it succinctly to a Washington Times reporter: “We have to get him ourselves.”

This way, it is their revolution — not something given to them by Western powers. This is particularly important for countries that, fairly or not, still bear some stigma of colonialism and imperialism.

U.S. leaders should do nothing that might inadvertently undermine that achievement.

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