



The State Department Dissenters Are Asking For Libya 2.0

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The bare bones of the story seem glamorous—even brave: 51 principled diplomats defy a stagnant presidency to call for bold action in the face of tyranny. It sounds the stuff of a Tom Hanks historical thriller or a thoughtful miniseries on HBO.

But the reality of the State Department’s dissent channel cable is at once more mundane and more dangerous than the “truth to power” narrative its signatories might like to promote. Particularly coming from the very department charged with using diplomacy to avoid unnecessary use of force, this push for further buccaneering in Syria in support of murky rebel factions (which in practice would likely mean the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad) is a facile effort to further entangle the United States in a problem which is not ours to solve.

While Secretary of State John Kerry is rumored to be sympathetic to cable’s cause—he met with eight of its authors Tuesday and has pushed for similarly reckless escalation in the past—even Vice President Biden rightly perceives that such a rush to war fails to account for what happens the morning after.

“[T]here is not a single, solitary recommendation that I saw that has a single, solitary answer attached to it—how to do what they’re talking about,” Biden said in an interview with CBS host Charlie Rose on Monday. “Tell me how this ends, Charlie,” he added, soon referencing his own administration’s signature failure in Libya in 2011.

The comparison is apt and should serve as a warning for those inclined to side with the belligerents at State. Indeed, the Libyan misadventure, organized at the ambition of then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, spilled U.S. blood and treasure on a tangential fight, managing by overthrowing strongman Moammar Gadhafi to produce a power vacuum into which ISIS has eagerly surged and developed its most sophisticated iteration yet. This intervention cost Americans much and gained us nothing, as Libya—which likely had a better shot at stability with the odious Gadhafi regime intact—was never essential to our security.

Today in Syria, we likewise find a dictator struggling to maintain power in the face of chaos; Islamic radicalism battering at the gates; and turmoil that would be better addressed by neighboring countries whose stake in the situation is clear and whose proximity facilitates action. We also again find little evidence that any possible outcome will be beneficial to American interests.

After all, even in the best case scenario—that Assad is removed and ISIS does not seize the power he abandons—the United States will be left with a massive, long-term nation-building project in a country halfway across the globe and of dubious connection to our vital security. With similarly fruitless and apparently endless nation-building projects already underway in Iraq, Afghanistan, and, yes, Libya, we would be imprudent at best to take on this additional war (and post-war) of choice.

As the Cato Institute’s Christopher Preble notes at Politico, “Americans should understand that we don’t need to overthrow distant governments and roll the dice on what comes after in order to keep America safe.”

That is true of the Libyan intervention of which he wrote, and it is true of Syria, too. Whether or not they realize it, the State Department dissenters are asking for Libya 2.0, another round of needless Mideast imbroglio. If President Obama is at all serious about his foreign policy maxim of not doing stupid stuff, he’ll send their cable straight to the trash.