

More Questions on Libya

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The Obama administration's decision to intervene militarily in Libya has been largely justified on the grounds that the U.S. and its allies were compelled to do this because if left on his own Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi would have killed many innocent Libyans guilty of nothing more than wanting a better life and more freedom. The general outline of this explanation is almost certainly true, but it is not entirely sufficient and leaves too many questions unanswered. Answering these questions is essential for winning enduring public support for this action, developing a strategy for winding down this intervention and for ensuring that it sets a positive precedent for the future.

The first question is when do the rantings of a dictator turn into a credible threat of crimes against humanity or genocide? Many authoritarian leaders make threats and almost all do brutal things to their own people, but not many actually commit acts of genocide. The rationale for the intervention in Libya is that Gaddafi somehow went beyond simply making threats and committing ordinary levels of brutality. It is critical to know what constituted crossing this line so that future decisions about intervention can be made wisely. It is also critical to know for certain that Gaddafi crossed this line and represented a credible threat of mass killings of his own people. Intervening simply to save a few lives, or even a few hundred lives, may be an appealing humanitarian action, but it sets an absolutely untenable precedent. On the other hand, if genocide or mass killings are likely to occur, then the rationale for intervention is much more urgent. Accordingly, the powers that intervened need to have a clear understanding of why this threat was real in Libya which goes beyond simply quoting Gaddafi's words.

A second and related question is how absolute does the U.S. intend to be about these criteria. Intervening to stop possible crimes against humanity in Libya raises both retrospective questions, such as why did the U.S. stand by and let genocide in Rwanda in 1994 happen as well as prospective questions such as will the U.S. now intervene in all cases of this kind? It is clear the U.S. cannot do this, but will probably limit its interventions to weaker countries whose leadership we dislike. If the Chinese government, for example, violently squashed demonstrations, as they have done in the past, it is almost certain there would be no military response from the U.S. and the west. Similarly, if the leadership of a weaker country that enjoyed more positive relations with the U.S. made violent threats towards demonstrators, the U.S. might not act the way we did in Libya. Accordingly, this intervention will lend itself to future charges of American, and western, hypocrisy on human rights. This is not, in of itself, an argument against the intervention, but it is an issue that must be addressed.

A third question is if the intervention is aimed at stopping a crime against humanity before it occurs, when does that obligation end? In this case, the argument for intervention was that if the U.S. and its allies did nothing Gaddafi would have killed

thousands. A no fly zone was a good way to prevent this from happening, but the U.S. cannot make an open-ended commitment in Libya, nor can it easily walk away after a few weeks of bombing. The intervention has fundamentally shifted power relations in Libya. If Gaddafi survives this, he will be significantly weakened with new groups and factions vying for power. At that point, for example, simply ending the no fly zone could shift the balance of power back to Gaddafi. Clearly, the U.S. must define when its humanitarian obligation ends. The Obama administration seems acutely aware of the perils of a long engagement in Libya, but extricating the U.S. from Libya will not be easy; and taking sides in a complex civil war will likely create a new set of problems.

A fourth question is to what extent are these obligations uniquely American. Obviously, the enormous strength of the American military relative to any other military in the world suggests that the U.S. will have to play a significant role in this or any other similar action. However, it is politically, militarily and economically unwise and unfeasible for the U.S. to always lead on these types of issues. Thus far in Libya, the U.S. has done much of the military actions, but the Obama administration has been successful in building a real coalition thus making this a multi-lateral effort. This has the potential to be a good precedent, but may not prove replicable in more complicated, difficult or expensive cases.

The intervention in Libya may already have saved thousands of lives, but this is extremely difficult to prove. To some extent, that is the nature of using the military to prevent something from happening. If claims like these, regardless of whether or not they are true, are thrown around lightly with little proof and poor definitions of terms, a precedent will be set for the U.S. that will prove expensive and entangling in the future. Moreover, if a plan for ending military action is not firmly in place, the U.S. could be in for another costly, dragged out, and ultimately unsuccessful involvement in the Middle East. Thus, these questions must be answered before this intervention can be declared a success.