

Opinion

Libya intervention threatens the Arab spring

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Western air and naval strikes against Libya are threatening the Arab Spring.

Ironically, one of the reasons many people supported the call for a no-fly zone was the fear that if Gaddafi managed to crush the Libyan people's uprising and remain in power, it would send a devastating message to other Arab dictators: Use enough military force and you will keep your job.

Instead, it turns out that just the opposite may be the result: It was after the UN passed its no-fly zone and use-of-force resolution, and just as US, British, French and other warplanes and warships launched their attacks against Libya, that other Arab regimes escalated their crack-down on their own democratic movements.

In Yemen, 52 unarmed protesters were killed and more than 200 wounded on Friday by forces of the US-backed and US-armed government of Ali Abdullah Saleh. It was the bloodiest day of the month-long Yemeni uprising. President Obama "strongly condemned" the attacks and called on Saleh to "allow demonstrations to take place peacefully".

But while a number of Saleh's government officials resigned in protest, there was no talk from Saleh's US backers of real accountability, of a travel ban or asset freeze, not even of slowing the financial and military aid flowing into Yemen in the name of fighting terrorism.

Similarly in US-allied Bahrain, home of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, at least 13 civilians have been killed by government forces. Since the March 15 arrival of 1,500 foreign troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, brought in to protect the absolute power of the king of Bahrain, 63 people have been reported missing.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, said: "We have made clear that security alone cannot resolve the challenges facing Bahrain. Violence is not the answer, a political process is."

But she never demanded that foreign troops leave Bahrain, let alone threatened a no-fly zone or targeted air strikes to stop their attacks.

Legality vs. legitimacy

Despite its official UN-granted legality, the credibility and legitimacy of Western military action is dwindling rapidly, even in key diplomatic circles. For the Western alliance, and most especially for the Obama administration, support from the Arab League was a critical prerequisite to approving the military intervention in Libya.

The League's actual resolution, passed just a couple of days before the UN Security Council vote, approved a far narrower military option - essentially only a no-fly zone, with a number of stated cautions against any direct foreign intervention.

Of course, a no-fly zone is foreign intervention, whether one wants to acknowledge it or not, but it is not surprising that the Arab League's approval was hesitant - it is, after all, composed of the exact same leaders who are facing inchoate or massive challenges to their ruling power at home. Supporting the attack on a fellow dictator - oops, sorry, a fellow Arab ruler - was never going to be easy.

And as soon as the air strikes began in Libya, Arab League chief Amr Moussa immediately criticised the Western military assault. Some commentators noted the likelihood that Arab governments were pressuring Moussa out of fear of Libyan terror attacks in their country; I believe it is more likely that Arab leaders fear popular opposition, already challenging their rule, will escalate as Libyan deaths rise.

Overlooking the African Union

Early on, the US had also identified support from the African Union (AU) as a critical component. But as it became clear that the AU would not sign on to the kind of attack on Libya contemplated in the UN resolution, the need for that support (indeed the AU itself) disappeared from Western discourse on the issue.

Shortly after the bombing began, the five-member AU committee on the Libya crisis called for an "immediate stop" to all the attacks and "restraint" from the international community.

It went further, calling for the protection of foreign workers with a particular reference to African expatriates in Libya (responding to reports of attacks on African workers by opposition forces), as well as "necessary political reforms to eliminate the cause of the present crisis".

So within 48 hours of the bombing campaign's opening salvos, the US and its allies have lost the support of the Arab and African institutions the Obama administration had identified as crucial for going ahead.

Other countries turned against the attacks as well; the Indian government, which had abstained on the Security Council vote, toughened its stance, saying that it "regrets the air strikes that are taking place" and that implementation of the UN resolution "should mitigate and not exacerbate an already difficult situation for the people of Libya".

The question remains, what is the end game? The UN resolution says force may only be used to protect Libyan civilians, but top US, British and French officials have stated repeatedly that "Gaddafi must go" and that he has "lost legitimacy to rule". They clearly want regime change.

The military commanders insist that regime change is not on their military agenda, that Gaddafi is not "on a target list," but there is a wink-and-a-nod at "what if" questions about a possible bombing "if he is inspecting a surface-to-air missile site, and we do not have any idea if he is there or not".

What you ask for ain't always what you get

There is no question Libya's opposition, like most of the democratic movements shaping this year's Arab Spring, wants an end to the dictatorial regime in their country.

Unlike the democratic movements in neighbouring countries, the Libyan movement is fighting an

armed military battle, something approaching a civil war, against the regime's forces.

That movement, facing a ruthless military assault, has paid a far higher price in lost and broken lives than the non-violent activists in the other democratic uprisings, and even with components of the military joining them, they were out-gunned and desperate. So it is not surprising that they pleaded for international support from the powerful countries and institutions most able to provide immediate military aid, even if that aid ultimately threatened their own independence.

But, what they got was probably way more than even the Libyan opposition itself anticipated. And despite the exultation over the first downed tanks, questions loom.

What if some kind of stalemate leaves Libya divided and military attacks continuing? What if the opposition realises that negotiations (perhaps under the auspices of newly democratising Egypt and Tunisia) are urgently needed, but cannot be convened because the US and French presidents have announced that the Libyan leader has no legitimacy and cannot be trusted?

And what if, as earlier US-imposed no-fly zones (both unilateral and UN-endorsed) have experienced, the attack leads to rising numbers of civilian casualties, killed by Western coalition bombs and an escalating, rather than diminishing, civil war? What then?

The UN resolution clearly is looking ahead to just such an eventuality. It calls on the secretary-general to inform the UN Security Council of all military actions, instructing him to "report to the Council within seven days and every month thereafter".

The UN, at least, seems to be preparing for another long war - that could last far longer than this year's Arab spring.

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