

No-fly zone will help stop Gaddafi's carnage

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State sovereignty is not a licence to kill. No state can abdicate the responsibility to protect its people from crimes against humanity, let alone justify perpetrating such crimes itself. When it manifestly fails in that protection, it is the responsibility of the international community to provide it, if necessary – should peaceful means be inadequate – by taking timely and decisive collective action [through the United Nations Security Council](#) . (...)

The Security Council, after moving with painful caution the first few days of the crisis, has over the weekend invoked the responsibility to protect principle and – in a historic first – agreed on a substantial package of measures to implement it: an arms embargo, asset freeze, travel bans and, importantly, reference of the situation to the International Criminal Court.

These measures are necessary and important, but they fall short of the threat or [use of military force](#) . Will they be enough to stop the killing? Or is it instead time to apply and enforce a no-fly zone, or to go further still and send in ground forces? This is a horribly difficult call, and not even the most passionate advocate of the responsibility to protect can pretend otherwise.

Declaring a no-fly zone is not the soft option it may seem: it must mean being prepared to shoot down jets and helicopter gunships that breach it, and that will mean a huge risk of hostage-taking or reprisal against any intervener's nationals still in the country. Any invasion force, assuming one could be mustered at short notice, would raise the stakes much higher still.

(...)The second great hope of advocates of responsibility to protect was that consensus in principle would make agreement much easier on what to do in practice. But that has proved harder, as experience in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka and elsewhere has unhappily demonstrated. But the lesson of these difficulties is not that the principle is irrelevant but that we have to do better in applying it in the future – and that future, with Libya, is now.

[Sanctions](#) , embargoes and the diplomatic isolation of Mr. Gaddafi are the inescapable minimum of what is now required. But if they do not bite immediately, and the carnage continues, there will be no option but to do more. Military options should always be a last resort, but they cannot be excluded in extreme cases. Libya is as extreme as it gets.

It will be desperately difficult to get agreement on foreign boots on the ground, quickly or at all. But a strongly enforced no-fly zone is a realistic option, easier to contemplate as the last vulnerable expatriates leave the country and likely to be just as effective in forcing Mr. Gaddafi's capitulation. Planning for it should start immediately. For all that it has done so far, the ball remains in the Security Council's court; not only the credibility of the responsibility to protect principle is at stake, but its own.

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