

The Mark

Does the UN Have a Responsibility to Protect Libyans?

W. Andy Knight and Daniel Pipes

7 March 2011 **One international relations expert says the United Nations has no right to intervene in the Libyan conflict. Another says it has no excuse not to.**

YES

W. Andy Knight

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It is clear that Gadhafi has abdicated his responsibility as a sovereign to protect the people under his care. According to the human-rights norm the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), state leaders have a responsibility to protect their people and those living within their sovereign borders. If a leader fails to protect his or her own people, then the international community has a residual responsibility to protect those individuals who are at risk. (...)

Clearly, Gadhafi and his sons have demonstrated that they are ready to commit further atrocities in order to remain in power. They have stated publicly that those who are challenging the government of Libya deserve to die and that the regime will fight them until the last drop of blood has been drawn. If we are to take Gadhafi at his word, we can expect that over the next few days the unstable and defiant Libyan leader and his family will do whatever it takes to remain in power. Their plan, according to Saif al-Islam Gadhafi, is to “live and die” in Libya. One can only infer that the Gadhafi clan and those who remain loyal to it will continue to commit acts of barbarity unless they are stopped.

So, barring the suicide or assassination of the embattled Libyan leader, the UN should go one step further to protect the lives of Libyan people. Using chapters 7 and 8 of the UN Charter, the UNSC should initiate and assemble (in collaboration with the Arab League, the African Union, and NATO) a strong enough military contingent to go into Libya and remove by force, if necessary, Gadhafi and his inner circle.

No Daniel Pipes

Director, Middle East Forum. Presumably, if outside forces did get involved, it would be to stifle the government’s ability to attack the population. It’s unlikely that they would get involved in deciding who should take over and what the future leadership should look like. The latter is not a good idea.

In fact, I’m not someone who expects anything from the UN. Something serious like this should be a NATO project. To me, the UN is fundamentally illegitimate, because it’s made up of authoritarian states, or dictatorships. (...)

But putting that aside, I do think the UN's intervention would be quite a radical step. I cannot think of other situations where there has been outside intervention in a situation of this sort. I'm not against it, but it is a major step. And it would be pretty easy for the UN to get involved in the situation in Libya, given how close it is to Europe, its small population, its geographic size, and the relative flatness of its land.

But would this set a precedent? Would it mean that international forces all over the world would intervene when governments attack their own populations? This is something that needs to be thought through carefully, because one wants to be consistent. One doesn't want to just do it where it's convenient.

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