

A clear mission in Libya, but history deters intervention

Faisal al Yafai The National 15 March 2011 (...) What now? Broadly, the moral case for action from the international community is impeccable. On the doorstep of Europe, civilians are being attacked in full view of the international community. Yet beyond that basic idea, the course of action to be followed is obscured, in large part, by the shadow of two Arab leaders, Saddam Hussein and Gamal Abdel Nasser. The first overshadows any notion of western intervention in the Middle East; the second overshadows the case for Arab intervention.

The US-UK invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have destroyed the will of the international community for military intervention. They have also undermined the moral arguments. (...) (...) Ironically, having been so far behind the mood of Arab societies since the start of the North African revolts, it would be politically toxic to act decisively now. The US called for restraint as protests rocked Hosni Mubarak; France offered to send security forces to aid Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime - but the West would happily attack Africa's biggest oil producer? Regardless of the truth of the argument, this would be a public relations coup for jihadis and autocrats, who would be able to paint what has so far been a genuine people's revolution as a western plot. (...)

(...) Yet anti-interventionists are in an even worse position. The poorly armed Libyan rebels clearly cannot win alone against Col Qaddafi's army. If the international community does not step in, what will happen? The best anti-interventionists can offer is a shrug that this is Libya's war to fight. But without help, it will be a fight to the death.

How to break the deadlock? One way forward would be for the United Nations to sanction an intervention, which could be led by or at least include Arab troops.

The UN issued a statement last month, reminding Libya of its "responsibility to protect its population". The responsibility to protect doctrine was agreed at the UN World Summit in 2005, authorising collective action by members to protect a state's population if that state's government could not or would not protect them in cases of genocide or war crimes. The UN ought to decide whether we have reached that point in Libya.

In theory, the best troops to protect Libyan civilians would be Arab soldiers. This would help to undermine any suggestion of a western plot. (...)

(...) Could an Arab army seriously attack another Arab army? Could Arab pilots fly sorties to protect Libyan civilians, while attacking the supporters of a leader who has ruled for decades? What precedent would it set? What would the Arab League say? (...)

(...) Any military action will be led by the international community, that much is clear. But the Arab world needs to be clear about what it is facing. Arab political solidarity should be about standing together in the face of common threats and standing with the people. (...)

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