The drawbacks of intervention in Libya: Concerns over oil markets, geopolitics and refugees might be behind no-fly zone decision, scholars argue.

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(...)Put simply, coercive external intervention to alter the balance of power on the ground in Libya in favor of the anti-Gaddafi revolt is likely to backfire badly.

The attendant costs would, of course, be borne not by those who call for intervention from outside of Libya but by the Libyan people with whom we hope to show solidarity. In what follows we argue that embracing the call for solidarity requires a much more careful appraisal of the interventionist option, precisely because the potential risks will be borne by Libyan civilians.

Mixed motivations

Of the arguments against intervention, the most straightforward draws on an assessment of the long history of external intervention in the Middle East and North Africa.

(...) For instance, the imposition of a no-fly-zone on Iraq did little in and of itself to shift the balance of power against the Saddam Hussein regime, but it did result in the deaths of hundreds of civilians.

Further, the no-fly zone served as a predicate for the subsequent invasion and occupation of Iraq insofar as the ongoing use of this coercive measure against the regime from 1991 until 2003 was cited in support of the argument that there was "implied authorisation" to forcibly topple the regime. (...)

(...)The historical record clearly establishes that an external regime change intervention based on mixed motives - even when accompanied with claims of humanitarianism - usually privileges the strategic and economic interests of interveners and results in disastrous consequences for the people on the ground. Indeed, the discord currently evidenced among Western powers concerning intervention in Libya is precisely based in their doubts as to whether their strategic interests are adequately served by such a course.

The incongruence between the interests of external interveners and those on the ground in Libya is already apparent. Beyond their eleventh hour timing, serious mobilisations for intervention on the part of Western powers were issued only after most Western nationals had been safely evacuated from Libya.

The fact that outside powers were unwilling to act while their nationals were on Libyan soil demonstrates their understanding that treating the regime with coercion may lead to civilian deaths either directly as a result of an intervention or indirectly through reprisals against civilians identified as opponents. (...)

No-fly zone, local calls, and solidarity

To be clear, we are not categorically rejecting any and all forms of intervention irrespective of the context. Instead, we reject forms of intervention that, on balance, are likely to produce more harm than benefit. This is a context-specific determination that requires an assessment of the forseeable consequences of particular proposed interventions. With respect to the context in Libya today we are critical of current proposals for intervention in light of the identities and interests of would-be interveners and the limited understanding of intra-Libyan political dynamics on which they rely. There are circumstances under which a no-fly zone might conceivably serve a humanitarian purpose.

In particular, if air strikes were the principal means by which the regime was inflicting civilian casualties, there would be a much stronger case for a no-fly zone. Though the military situation within Libya remains unclear, the empirical evidence that is available suggests that Gaddafi's artillery poses a more serious threat to both civilians and rebels than air strikes.(...)

(...) Fragmentation risk

Furthermore, a response to calls emanating from one region may risk fragmenting the country. The fact that we know so little about the domestic context among non-regime actors in Libya is precisely the reason that the types of external intervention currently taking place are likely to backfire. (...)

(...)Useful assistance

We argue for forms of international assistance that reverse this privileging and begin from the known interests of Libyan civilians. At a minimum, resources must be mobilised to offer relief supplies to the Libyan population that is currently outside of the control of the regime (bearing in mind some of the problematic dynamics also associated with such forms of "aid").

Urgent priority should be given to addressing shortages of medical supplies and provision of essential foods and clean water. Beyond these basics, an evacuation corridor for civilians – including non-Libyan African workers trapped in the territory – should be secured and responsibility for shouldering the burden of refugee flows should not be restricted to Tunisia and Egypt.

To the contrary, rather than imposing these costs on Libya's poorest neighbors – in the early stages of transitions of their own – Libya's relatively wealthy northern neighbors in Europe should be absorbing a much larger share of the costs, human and material, of offering refuge to fleeing civilians.(...)

Support Libyan rebels?

There may be other alternatives short of external coercive intervention that might be considered – such as sharing tactical intelligence with Libyan rebels or jamming regime communications – though such options would have to be carefully evaluated in light of potential risks. (...)

(...)In the end, we argue for humility in imagining the role we might play in the course of Libyans' struggle. The international community is neither entitled to take the reins today nor dictate the post-regime scenario tomorrow. Further, those of us who wish to stand in solidarity with Libyans from outside of their country must recognise that we may not be best placed to identify which local actors enjoy broad-based support.

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