

Strategic Dialogue: Libya War Robert Naiman and Ian Williams Foreign Policy in Focus 5 April 2011

In the second part of our strategic dialogue on the Libya War, Robert Naiman and Ian Williams respond to their initial essays. You can read the original essays here: Naiman's anti-intervention essay

[Surprise War for Regime Change in Libya is the Wrong Path](#)

and Ian Williams' pro-intervention essay

[Armchair Anti-Imperialists and Libya](#)

Ian Williams

(...) The default American position is usually isolationist, and the Good Samaritan is not a popular parable in American political discourse. It was not the White House that started the operation. The Libyan plea went to the Security Council of the United Nations – with the support of much of the Libyan diplomatic corps, one might point out. The UN resolution does not call for a no-fly zone. It called directly for military intervention to protect civilians – and to assuage those justifiably wary of US involvement in the region after Iraq, or indeed Susan Rice's veto of the resolution against Israeli settlements, it precluded occupying forces.

(...) It is indeed entirely possible that the respite awarded the rebels will result in regime change. And why is that a bad thing? This regime responded to peaceful demonstrations demanding popular power by gunning down its own people. This regime accepted the validity of the UN resolution and immediately declared a ceasefire, just before launching indiscriminate air and artillery attacks on its own cities.

If Hugo Chavez's negotiations had delayed the attacks on Gaddafi's tanks, Benghazi and its citizenry would today be a smoldering pile. The International Criminal Court referral was intended to send a message to Gaddafi that there would be consequences, that he had no impunity. He ignored that message. Is there a way to protect civilians that leaves intact a dictatorial regime that has pledged bloody vengeance against its own citizenry?

(...) When people cry for help you do what you can. And yes, what happened in Bahrain is shameful, even though the regime has yet to use airpower and artillery against its own city. So rather than opposing intervention in Libya, it would be much more constructive to call on the United States to cut off relations with Bahrain, or indeed Saudi Arabia, until the repression stops. But opposition is always easy, while calling for action involves taking responsibility for the results.

Robert Naiman

(...) Williams suggests that "Libyans" support the current Western military intervention. Indeed, some Libyans do support it. Other Libyans do not. Clearly, many Libyans in Benghazi support the current Western military intervention. Just as clearly, many Libyans in Tripoli and Sirte don't support the current Western military intervention. If we care about the opinions of "Libyans," it's not obvious why the opinions of these Libyans in Tripoli and Sirte should count for zero.

(...) Williams appears to be unconcerned by, and indeed to welcome, the morphing of the military intervention from "protecting civilians" to "regime change." But indifference to or support of this transformation would make a mockery of any kind of accountability for Western military operations.

You could sell public opinion on one thing, obtain a UN Security Council resolution, and then do something else entirely. This would mean that "Responsibility to Protect" would become "unlimited license to do anything." One might think those who support the principle of "Responsibility to Protect" would see this as a threat to the invocation of this principle in the future. I was more sympathetic to "Responsibility to Protect" before I saw how it was used in this case; if the conclusion of the current military operation is military regime change rather than a negotiated solution, I will hold that against future invocations of "Responsibility to Protect." (...)

This means we must insist that Security Council resolutions not give carte blanche in theory or practice and that sharp distinctions be maintained between "protecting civilians" and other measures undertaken and considered, such as supporting rebel military advances with air strikes, attacking military forces not engaged in attacking civilians or poised to do so, arming rebels, and military regime change.

See the rest of the [exchange between Naiman and Williams](#)