

A chess game in the Libyan Desert Dawn.com Irfan Husain 6 April 2011 (...)The whole concept of humanitarian intervention is being tested over the skies of Libya. The “**responsibility to protect**

” was formulated by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2001 after the genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans. This doctrine was approved unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 2005. Mehdi Hasan, writing in New Statesman, quotes Gareth Evans, the former Australian foreign minister, who explains this doctrine thus:

“Every country has the

responsibility to protect

its own citizens from mass killings and ethnic cleansing. If a country is unwilling or unable to do so, the international community has a responsibility to launch military intervention.”

When Qadhafi threatened to wipe out the rebels – and had the means and the motive to do so – he triggered the muscular response his forces are now having to face. As I wrote here recently, I would be happy to see this brutal dictator kicked out sooner rather than later. His 42 years in power have been 42 years too long. Vindictive and pathological, he has abused his unchecked powers, making himself a laughing stock in the process.

But as he hangs on to power, international resolve is being tested, and doubts are being raised about the whole project. These will continue to rise with the mounting death toll, and the absence of a resolution. The problem is that none of the coalition members want to send troops to Libya to help the rebels, and as history teaches us, air power alone does not allow one side to take and hold territory.

From a no-fly zone, the rebels have upped their demands to ask for weapons. But these will require training, and there is general reluctance to send instructors to the war-torn country. Then there is the rising chorus of voices suggestion caution: many fear that Islamists will take over the anti-Qadhafi movement once it has been helped to topple the dictator.

Given the confusion and chaos that surrounds the rebels, it is hard to discern any clear line of control. This disharmony is sabotaging the military effort as different leaders try and grab power. This is inevitable, given that Qadhafi did not allow any political parties to organise themselves over the last four decades. But the vision of an undisciplined rabble slaughtering Qadhafi’s supporters makes Nato allies very uncomfortable.

Many opponents of the intervention ask why the West has not acted to protect those seeking to topple dictators in other Arab states. This is a fair question, but it ignores the dictates of realpolitik. In the case of Libya, Saudi Arabia used its clout with the Arab League to issue a request to the UN for military action to protect civilians there. But Bahrain is a Saudi protectorate, and an American ally, as is Yemen.

So while in theory, all opponents of dictatorship deserve support and help, in practice, they don't always get it. This cherry-picking of movements may seem unfair, but if all rebels cannot be aided, it does not mean that nobody should be thrown a lifeline.

The whole doctrine of humanitarian intervention raises hackles in autocracies like Russia and China. Both have used brutal force against their own people in the past, and might well do so again. While we are unlikely to see Nato planes over Chechnya or Xinjiang to protect the separatists there, the leadership in both countries feel distinctly uncomfortable over the Libyan situation. Moscow has already protested that the ongoing military action exceeds the UN remit.

The Arab League, too, is squirming over its forced endorsement of the intervention.

Representing the cream of the Arab autocracy, it wishes the rising tide of democratic movements in the region would just disappear. But we are only at the start of a long saga. For many Arab countries, the endgame has just begun.

I, for one, am glad that the whole concept of the inviolability of national sovereignty has been subverted by the right to protect. Far too often, vicious strongmen have slaughtered their own people to cling to power. We don't have to look far for examples: forty years ago, our army launched a terrible massacre, bordering on genocide, in East Pakistan in a doomed bid to preserve national unity. Today, it is unthinkable that General Yahya would have been allowed to get away with his murderous assault on Bengali separatists.(...)

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