

What it takes to Protect Civilians in Libya Open Society Foundations Fatima Ayub 20 April 2011

(
...) The massacre intended for Benghazi that prompted international action has instead made its grisly way to Misurata. The coastal town, besieged since February, is fighting back against government forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi. The scale of the humanitarian crisis there far outstrips available assistance, and only a

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have risked the onslaught to reveal Misurata's devastating fate.

The battle in Misurata, along with the shells of Gaddafi's destroyed tanks and weaponry outside Benghazi, should leave observers in no doubt of the Libyan dictator's lethal intentions toward his own civilian population. But the elation that accompanied the United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing 'all necessary means' at the international community's disposal to protect civilians has rapidly dwindled with the realization that an effective military effort to that end cannot be conducted from the sky.

(...) The opposition has to be trained to fight, as most are willing but inexperienced in combat. Even with arms and munitions, without training, weapons are useless and likely to lend to chaos in the battle space. Even at the fastest clip, basic training for fighters takes about three months. If the armed opposition cannot be relied on to protect civilians, then the international community must urgently revisit what 'all necessary means' would entail, and seriously consider the option of a targeted ground campaign to repel attacks on civilians and withdraw rapidly.

Appetite is weak for either option. The proliferation and misapplication of arms, a lack of command and control structures, and well-meaning but untrained forces are a recipe for further destabilization. With future oil revenues the armed opposition may well seek to arm itself, independent of formal support from NATO or others. And though one could make the case that ground forces are a necessary element of successful civilian protection, NATO and Arab governments are not political or practically prepared to defend Libyan lives with their own.

The intervention in Libya, though rightly sanctioned and with just cause under the doctrine of **responsibility to protect**

, was short on planning and long on hope. Even the purest of interventions are ultimately military operations, and thus need good strategy, resources, and execution. Without these components, fighting for a good cause serves no one--not the intervening forces and not the civilians on the ground. Moreover, a rightly-intended intervention badly planned gives cheap fodder to all those contend that interventions are impossible.

NATO and the UN must revisit what 'all necessary means' of protection would entail and decide if they can commit to those means. If they can't or won't, Libya's revolution will be a long and bloody one, and is not likely to favor the hopeful, beleaguered democratic opposition. (...)

See

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