

Why We Have a Responsibility to Protect Syria Shadi Hamid The Atlantic 26 January 2012 *Shadi Hamid is director of research at the Brookings Doha Center and a fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.*

I was an early supporter of military intervention in Libya. I called for a no-fly zone on February 23, just 8 days after protests began. Now, we're nearly 300 days into the Syrian uprising. Very few analysts, myself included, have publicly called for foreign intervention, even though the Syrian regime has proven both more unyielding and more brutal than Muammar Qaddafi's.

Steven Cook, in a recent and controversial piece, made the case for the military option in Syria. I agree with much of Cook's article but not all of it. Emotionally, and from a purely moral perspective, I agree with all of it. The risks of intervention, however, are tremendous. Marc Lynch has made the most persuasive case for caution. So I find myself torn.

It may make sense, then, to revisit the reasons I, and several others (...) broke ranks with our colleagues on the left and supported the NATO operation in Libya. First, American policymakers should -- as a matter of principle -- take Arab public opinion seriously. In the lead-up to the Iraq War, there were no widespread calls among Iraqis themselves for us, or anyone else, to intervene militarily. In Libya, there were. The Libyan rebels were practically begging us to step in with military force.

In recent months, a rapidly growing number of Syrian activists, both on the ground and those in exile, have called forcefully and repeatedly for some form of foreign intervention, whether through the establishment of no-fly zones, no-drive zones, humanitarian corridors, "safe zones," or through the arming of rebel forces such as the Free Syrian Army.

The Syrian National Council, the most important Syrian opposition body and the closest analogue to Libya's National Transitional Council, has unequivocally called for foreign intervention. Its leaders have repeatedly issued such calls to the international community in similarly clear language. (...)

As I argued in a recent article in *The New Republic*

, Arab protesters and revolutionaries, despite their often passionate dislike of U.S. policy, continue to turn to us for support in their time of need. This should not be taken lightly. In a time when millions of Arabs are demanding and dying for their freedom, the United States finds itself in a privileged role. (...)

Some critics of the Libya intervention feared it would set a precedent. I hoped it would set a precedent -- that whenever pro-democracy protesters were threatened with massacre, the U.S., Europe, and its allies would take the

responsibility to protect

seriously, and consider military intervention as a legitimate option -- provided that those on the ground asked us to do so.

Unfortunately, one successful case of military intervention -- in Libya -- is not enough to establish a precedent. For too long, the Syrian regime has assumed, correctly it turns out, that Libya was the exception that proved the rule. Obama administration officials have said as much, insisting that the military option is

not

being seriously considered for Syria. (...)

Indeed, there are a number of reasons why intervention, today, would be premature. But it may not be premature in a month or in two. The international community must begin considering a variety of military options -- the establishment of "safe zones" seems the most plausible -- and determine which enjoys the highest likelihood of causing more good than harm. This is now -- after nearly a year of waiting and hoping -- the right thing to do. It is also the responsible thing to do.

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