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The International Community Should Have Intervened in Libya

Ahmed Moor

Ahmed Moor is a journalist. In the following viewpoint, written before the overthrow of the Muammar Gaddafi government in the fall of 2011, he suggests that international intervention in Libya is a legitimate decision for two reasons: the Libyan rebels requested aid from the outside world, and many people agree that the situation in Libya is horrifying and unsustainable. Moor emphasizes that a successful intervention would mean that the international community would take a backseat to the Libyan rebels, providing them with the support they need to overthrow the regime. Moor asserts that it also would mean refraining from trying to install a puppet government that would do the bidding of the West.

Ahmed Moor, "A War of Western Imperialism?," Al Jazeera, March 28, 2011. Copyright © 2011 by Al Jazeera. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

How Should the International Community Respond to the Arab Spring?

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, who is to blame more than any other figure in the post-war twentieth century for eroding the gains in legitimacy for supranational institutions and their proponents?
2. In what year does the author say that the United States was able to strong-arm weaker states to invade Iraq?
3. What does the author see as the consequences of a successful revolution in Bahrain?

There is a lot about the Western intervention in Libya that could go wrong—and it remains to be seen whether bombing [Muammar] Gaddafi¹ and his mercenaries is a good decision.

However, large numbers of people around the world appear to support the objectives of the anti-regime forces. Also, the indigenous resistance movement—which requested help—would have been annihilated in the absence of those air strikes.

George [W.] Bush's legacy of destruction extends beyond the piles of brick, flesh and mortar that we have been tallying for a decade now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

More than any other figure in the post-war 20th century, the last American president did more to erode the gains in legitimacy made by supranational institutions and their proponents.

After the Iraq war, the United Nations [UN] began to be perceived as a US rubber-stamp body—or worse—as a meaningless exercise in bureaucracy.

The UN can only function legitimately through consensus (or consensus-like) decision making and it was clear that the US was strong-arming weaker states in 2003.

1. Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed by rebel forces near his hometown of Sirte on October 20, 2011.

George Bush and the neoconservatives hijacked the legitimate language of consensus-based intervention for their own ill use.

So activists are not wrong to react cynically when they hear that language today; I don't believe that bombing Gaddafi is a humanitarian gesture.

But George Bush should not be allowed to delegitimize the mechanisms—which are distinct from the language—of global intervention in situations that offend human rights and dignity.

Today, many people agree that the situation in Libya is horrifying. Furthermore, the Libyan rebels requested aid from the outside world.

Those two conditions alone do not justify intervention but they are crucial components of a legitimate international decision to employ force.

What Is a Successful Intervention?

The question of what a successful intervention means is a very important one. At the very least, it means taking a backseat and supporting the rebels in the capacity that they desire.

It also means not attempting to install a new government that's pliant and subordinate to the West. Compromise on these two principles will quickly diminish the legitimacy of the campaign against Gaddafi.

Many people have argued that the intervention is a Western imperialist project. Here, it is worth remembering that Western powers were already in control of Libya's oil when the revolution began.

Muammar Gaddafi was as much "our guy" as [Egyptian president] Hosni Mubarak. [Former secretary of state] Condoleezza Rice personally visited Libya and met with Gaddafi in 2008.

The following year [former British prime minister] Tony Blair pushed for the release of the Lockerbie bomber [refer-

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ring to Libyan citizen Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed al-Megrahi who was convicted of killing 270 people when he placed a bomb on an airplane that exploded over Scotland] to secure a sweetheart deal with the Libyan regime (although it was [British prime minister] Gordon Brown who did the releasing).

Western powers would have been much better served by backing Gaddafi if oil was their object.

An Imperialist Argument

There is an alternative imperialism argument: that the intervention is really a push to consolidate Western control over Libyan resources. But, without intervention the rebels would have most certainly been annihilated by Gaddafi's superior forces.

So why back the losing horse? How can Western powers be sure they can succeed in creating a more agreeable government? Would not they go with the devil they know, especially when he is already their devil?

Finally, any government that takes shape in Libya in the future will have to address the basic issues that fueled the popular uprising there in the first place.

Gaddafi is an imperial stooge and a new imperial government will ensure that the underlying conditions will not go away.

Spreading Goodwill and Avoiding Oil Price Spikes

So what's motivating the Western powers into projecting their power into Libya? And why is the West not intervening in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia or Yemen?

The potential benefit of successfully backing the rebels will be an increase in goodwill across the Arab world directed at the West. It is not clear if that is a realistic expectation, but it is one that appears to motivate Western leaders.

Muammar Qaddafi, the Former Ruler of Libya

Muammar Qaddafi, the longtime leader of the oil-rich country of Libya, was one of the United States' major foes. Considered a zealot and terrorist, he was driven by the idea of a united Islamic "Arab nation" linking the region from the Persian Gulf to the north coast of Africa on the Atlantic Ocean. Qaddafi, however, completed Libya's international rehabilitation in 2006 when the United States announced it would restore full diplomatic relations. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the U.S. would drop its designation of Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism. Rice, according to the *New York Times*, cited "tangible results that flow from the historic decisions taken by Libya's leadership in 2003 to renounce terrorism and to abandon its weapons of mass destruction programs." However, Qaddafi continued to rule Libya as a tyrant, and reports of criminal activity and the murder of Libyan citizens were brought forth to the International Criminal Court. An uprising in early 2011 forced Qaddafi out of power by August of that year. On October 20, 2011, during a battle between his soldiers and the revolutionary fighters who had come to arrest him, the dictator was killed.

"Muammar Qaddafi,"
Gale Biography in Context,
October 26, 2011.

Meanwhile, the cost of attacking Gaddafi and his mercenaries in a limited way and supplying the rebels with arms is relatively low. It is not clear if the cost is actually low, but it's likely that it is perceived that way since the intervention is already under way.

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In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the opposite is true. The American president Barack Obama will seek reelection, so it is in his interest to prevent the global economy from stagnating then shrinking.

A successful revolution in Bahrain may destabilize Saudi Arabia which would drive the price of oil up which could cause the US economy to stall. It is just not a risk worth taking for him.

Probably, fears of an insurgent Iran—legitimate or not—play into his calculations as well. That's because most Bahrainis are Shias.

Yemen

Likewise, Yemen permits the Americans to pursue al Qaeda affiliates in that country. That goes directly to Obama's security credentials.

If Yemen lapses, Obama will be accused, rightly or wrongly, of permitting terrorist sympathizers to take control in yet another Middle Eastern country. And the 2012 election campaign is already under way.

Intervention in Libya could turn out badly in many different and unforeseen ways. And imperialism and neoliberal "reforms"—which are a problem in that country—did not arrive with the revolution; they preceded it.

We can aspire towards helping young Libyans reform their society to make it more democratic, just and anti-imperialist. But before they can do that they must survive Gaddafi's pulverizing onslaught. And that's something that the Western offensive gives them a chance of doing.

"The point isn't just that Western intervention in Libya is grossly hypocritical. It's that such double standards are an integral part of a mechanism of global power and domination that stifles hopes of any credible international system of human rights protection."

The International Community Should Not Have Intervened in Libya

Seumas Milne

Seumas Milne is an associate editor and columnist for the Guardian. In the following viewpoint, written before the overthrow of the Muammar Gaddafi government and the subsequent killing of Gaddafi by rebel forces in the fall of 2011, Milne asserts that international intervention in the Libyan conflict was hypocritical, ineffective, and immoral. Milne suggests that Western justifications for the intervention based on humanitarian reasons are false; in fact, he maintains, it was motivated by the

Seumas Milne, "There's Nothing Moral About NATO's Intervention in Libya," *Guardian*, March 23, 2011. Copyright © 2011 by The Guardian. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

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desire to get on the "right side of history" and to secure oil interests. He concludes that the intervention was a threat to the entire North African region.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, what percentage of British citizens polled were against the Libyan intervention as of March 2011?
2. How many people does the author estimate live in Benghazi?
3. What happened in Kosovo in 1999 after international intervention, according to the author?

It's as if it's a habit they can't kick. Once again US, British and other NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] forces are bombarding an Arab country with cruise missiles and bunker-busting bombs. Both David Cameron [the prime minister of the United Kingdom] and [US president] Barack Obama insist this is nothing like Iraq. There will be no occupation. The attack is solely to protect civilians.

But eight years after they launched their shock-and-awe devastation of Baghdad and less than a decade since they invaded Afghanistan, the same Western forces are in action against yet another Muslim state, incinerating soldiers and tanks on the ground and killing civilians in the process.

Supported by a string of other NATO states, almost all of which have taken part in the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations, the US, Britain and France are clinging to an Arab fig leaf, in the shape of a Qatari air force that has yet to arrive, to give some regional credibility to their intervention in Libya.

Humanitarian Justifications

As in Iraq and Afghanistan, they insist humanitarian motives are crucial. And as in both previous interventions, the media are baying for the blood of a pantomime villain leader, while

regime change is quickly starting to displace the stated mission. Only a Western solipsism that regards it as normal to be routinely invading other people's countries in the name of human rights protects NATO governments from serious challenge.

Public Opinion

But the campaign is already coming apart. At home, public opinion is turning against the onslaught: In the US, it's opposed by a margin of two-to-one; in Britain, 43% say they are against the action, compared with 35% in support—an unprecedented level of discontent for the first days of a British military campaign, including Iraq.

On the ground, the Western attacks have failed to halt the fighting and killing, or force Colonel [Muammar] Gaddafi's forces into submission; NATO governments have been squabbling about who's in charge; and British ministers and generals have fallen out about whether the Libyan leader is a legitimate target.

Last week [March 13–19, 2011], NATO governments claimed the support of “the international community” on the back of the UN [United Nations] resolution and an appeal from the dictator-dominated Arab League. In fact, India, Russia, China, Brazil and Germany all refused to support the UN vote and have now criticised or denounced the bombing—as has the African Union and the Arab League itself.

A Step Too Far

As its secretary-general, Amr Moussa, argued, the bombardment clearly went well beyond a no-fly zone from the outset. By attacking regime troops fighting rebel forces on the ground, the NATO governments are unequivocally intervening in a civil war, tilting the balance of forces in favour of the Benghazi-based insurrection.

Cameron insisted on Monday in the Commons [the lower house of British Parliament] that the air and sea attacks on Libya had prevented a “bloody massacre in Benghazi”. The main evidence was Gaddafi's threat to show “no mercy” to rebel fighters who refused to lay down their arms and to hunt them down “house to house”. In reality, for all the Libyan leader's brutality and [former Iraqi leader] Saddam Hussein-style rhetoric, he was scarcely in any position to carry out his threat.

Given that his ramshackle forces were unable to fully retake towns like Misrata or even Ajdabiya when the rebels were on the back foot, the idea that they would have been able to overrun an armed and hostile city of 700,000 people any time soon seems far-fetched.

What About Bahrain?

But on the other side of the Arab world, in Western-armed Bahrain, security forces are right now staging night raids on opposition activists, house by house, and scores have gone missing as the dynastic despots carry out a bloody crackdown on the democratic movement. And last Friday more than 50 peaceful demonstrators were shot dead on the streets of Sana'a by government forces in Western-backed Yemen.

Far from imposing a no-fly zone to bring the embattled Yemeni regime to heel, US special forces are operating across the country in support of the government. But then US, British and other NATO forces are themselves responsible for hundreds of thousands of dead in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last week more than 40 civilians were killed by a US drone attack in Pakistan, while over 60 died last month in one US air attack in Afghanistan.

The Hypocrisy of International Intervention

The point isn't just that Western intervention in Libya is grossly hypocritical. It's that such double standards are an in-

tegral part of a mechanism of global power and domination that stifles hopes of any credible international system of human rights protection.

À la carte humanitarian intervention, such as in Libya, is certainly not based on feasibility or the degree of suffering or repression, but on whether the regime carrying it out is a reliable ally or not. That's why the claim that Arab despots will be less keen to follow Gaddafi's repressive example as a result of the NATO intervention is entirely unfounded. States such as Saudi Arabia know very well they're not at the slightest risk of being targeted unless they're in danger of collapse.

There's also every chance that, as in Kosovo in 1999, the attack on Libya could actually increase repression and killing, while failing to resolve the underlying conflict. It's scarcely surprising that, outgunned by Gaddafi's forces, the Libyan rebel leadership should be grateful for foreign military support. But any Arab opposition movement that comes to power courtesy of Tornados and Tomahawks will be fatally compromised, as would the independence of the country itself.

The Right Side of History

For the Western powers, knocked off balance by the revolutionary Arab tide, intervention in the Libyan conflict offers both the chance to put themselves on the "right side of history" and to secure their oil interests in a deeply uncertain environment.

Unless the Libyan autocrat is assassinated or his regime implodes, the prospect must now be of a bloody stalemate and a Kurdistan-style NATO protectorate in the east. There's little sympathy for Gaddafi in the Arab world, but already influential figures such as the Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah have denounced the intervention as a return to the "days of occupation, colonisation and partition".

The urgent alternative is now for countries such as Egypt and Turkey, with a far more legitimate interest in what goes

on in Libya and links to all sides, to take the lead in seeking a genuine cease-fire, an end to outside interference and a negotiated political settlement. There is nothing moral about the NATO intervention in Libya—it is a threat to the entire region and its people.