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www.afgazad.com

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The U.S. Should Not Make War on Libya

By: George Kenney

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In the early phases of the Bosnian civil war I thought — wrongly, in retrospect — that the west had a narrow window of opportunity to throw in our lot with a genuinely multi-ethnic Bosnian government, to bring the war to a swift and just resolution. One of my mistakes was in not seeing that the Sarajevo government contrived to maintain the veneer of multi-ethnicity but was, in fact, a Muslim enterprise whose penchant for atrocities was only slightly inferior to that of the official international villains, the Serbs. Nor did the Muslims have a much lower atrocity count than the historically blood-thirsty Croats. (It took me a couple trips wandering around the battlefield to become convinced.) The best outcome had always been a negotiated settlement but Washington waited almost five years before accepting that reality. By the end, in 1995, when all three sides were exhausted — front line fighters had largely stopped shooting — a few minor bombing campaigns got undeserved credit for clinching the Dayton deal but the bombing's harmful, longer term fallout became obscured.

In any case, in November 1992 I had co-authored an [op-ed](#) with former U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael J. Dugan in the *New York Times*, laying out how a serious bombing campaign might work. This does not make me an expert but I did have an opportunity, at Mike's behest, to consult with a then currently serving Colonel who had planned the air war for Operation Desert Storm. Although the U.S. never undertook anything like our proposed "Operation Balkan Storm," I think it's fair to say that things would not have worked as expected.

The same could be said for a no fly zone in Libya.

The pro-intervention crowd makes the argument that after boxing in Gaddafi through economic sanctions, the threat of war crimes trials, etc., we're therefore responsible for the consequences of his having nothing left to lose from unleashing his full wrath against the Libyan people. It's the familiar common law principle of the responsibility of a good Samaritan but, as applied to Libya, it's sophistry, because the consequences are of a different order. To help save the Libyan people, or not, vastly oversimplifies the problem.

Several parts of the interventionist argument contain unexamined assumptions. One, mentioned repeatedly by Bob Gates, is that a no fly zone requires a small war to be put into effect. Before U.S. aircraft could safely enforce a no fly zone Libyan anti-aircraft assets must be wiped out. It's doubtful we know already where they all are so we'd have to find them, probably most of them, by running enough air raids to provoke government forces to turn on their radars, at which point those sites can be neutralized. On the other hand, it's also likely that Col. Gaddafi would salt mobile units into populated areas, near mosques, hospitals, schools, etc. The prospect both of a few U.S. planes being blown out of the Libyan sky and horrific "collateral damage" on the ground should give pause.

Cognizant of those dangers, a few interventionists are arguing, instead, for a limited no fly zone over the eastern, rebel controlled areas. This, they say, would be considerably less demanding and would give the rebels time to arm and train themselves. It would be as straightforward and as casualty free for us, they say, as the limited no fly zones over northern and southern Iraq (from the end of the first Gulf War through the beginning of the second).

But the circumstances are not the same. After being severely beaten in the first Gulf War Saddam Hussein was not about to precipitate another round of full scale warfare. Though he did try to shoot down coalition aircraft enforcing the zones he didn't try very hard. More importantly, the Iraqi no fly zones were formally static, having been intended to protect certain Kurdish and Marsh Arab populations from attack. In contrast, in Libya, logically, a limited no fly zone would have to have a somewhat elastic character because the rebels aren't so much fleeing from Col. Gaddafi as they are trying to seize power from him. After the establishment of a limited no fly zone, for example, if the rebels were to close on Tripoli, would the interventionists then tell them that they were henceforth on their own? No — most likely the no fly zone would follow the front.

All this prompts the question of who it is, exactly, getting arms and training under our no fly zone protection. Are they "the good guys?" Suppose not all of them are so good and that, just as in most civil wars, some of them commit horrible atrocities. At what point does our protection confer indirect responsibility?

Another consideration, one that interventionists generally don't address, is how a small war against Libya might motivate pro-government forces to fight back. To the extent that loyalists are wavering, calculating their options, it's reasonable to suppose that an outside threat could bring many firmly back into the fold. The same is true for a much larger number of "undecided" Libyans who must choose between the government or the rebels.

Moreover, outsiders with a militant anti-U.S. agenda would likely converge on Libya. For the most part they would be two-bit mercenaries but a few might have genuine talent. Prolonged combat could well create, in effect, a new graduate program for anti-American terrorism.

It's worth reminding ourselves that a small war is not necessarily going to be a quick war and that we can't count on Col. Gaddafi leaving Libya of his own volition. The fact is, even without intervention nobody knows how long the turmoil in Libya may last. It could be over tomorrow, or it could last a month, or two, or even as long as a few years.

While interventionists talk a good game about the sanitary, long-distance nature of a no fly zone, once started, a small war would create enormous political pressures to secure Libya's oil fields — the ninth largest reserves in the world — or even just the field that accounts for the most production (the Sirte basin, midway between government controlled Tripoli and rebel held Benghazi). Even assuming that the U.S. military could undertake such an effort it's a sure bet that U.S. political officers would not know how to handle Libyan tribal politics. Thus an introduction of U.S. ground forces could only add to the likelihood of a longer war.

With or without ground forces a small U.S. war against Libya could further agitate the rest of the Maghreb, the larger middle east, and even more distant areas, like Pakistan. Even under the best circumstances such agitation would be dangerous but, given the spirit of insurrection currently sweeping the Muslim world, this is perhaps the worst possible time to again offer ourselves as a potential target. Prudence suggests we not commit to unnecessary provocations until things have quieted down.

Interventionists, however, speculate that the opposite may be true: if a tyrannical regime with blood on its hands is left standing during this wave of reform then other repressive regimes may resort to force against "peaceful demonstrators" and those in opposition will be less likely to take risks. By *not acting* in Libya, they say, the impetus to democratization may wane. It's an interesting argument but, again, within it are important unexamined assumptions, most notably that the opposition groups who are protesting are peaceful. In Libya, manifestly they are not. So the other side of the coin is the question whether the U.S. wants to encourage violent insurrections against undemocratic regimes, either as a general policy or on a case by case basis. Perhaps, or perhaps not, but this is clearly a different — a more strategic — question than just whether we want to "help" Libya.

Then there's the issue of by what authority we would go to war. In the first two Gulf wars the U.S. managed to secure a fig leaf of legality. Here, that's not as easily done. Both Russia and China have made it abundantly clear that they disapprove of military action against Libya so it's unrealistic to expect any use of force resolution from the UN Security Council. The U.S. *might* be able to put together another 'coalition of the willing' within NATO but not even all NATO members think that the use of force is a good idea. If asked, the UK and France would probably participate in a U.S.-led effort, for example, but Germany would not. Once again the U.S. would strain the limits of international law and sow seeds of mistrust. In the longer run, in the same way that the Russians used the precedents of Bosnia and Kosovo in justifying their 2008 seizure of South Ossetia, other states might justify an *ad hoc* decision to go to war based upon what we do

in Libya. If our goal is to inhibit wars of aggression — and it is — we have little choice but to play by the rules even if sometimes we don't like them.

And what about Congress? Nobody seems to be asking whether Congress might have a role in deciding whether to go to war with Libya but it's a legitimate question. If one goes by the Constitution it does; if one prefers to ignore the Constitution that's OK too, but the repeated precedent tends to accumulate a potentially dangerous power in the presidency. In the future, it would be neither reasonable nor expedient to depend upon all presidents to use that power judiciously.

To be honest, there is also a question of sincerity. I've no doubt that many of those who want a U.S. military intervention in Libya are completely sincere and are trying to understand the situation from the purest humanitarian perspective. But when one sees most of the same gang that argued for both Gulf Wars in full-throated synchronization over the virtues of going to war with Libya, one must consider the probability that other (murky) interests are involved.

The danger is that a large number of senior Obama administration officials believe, wrongly, that a little bit of bombing works. Bosnia, they say, proved it. But learning the wrong lessons from Bosnia could lead to a tragic mistake.