

Libya, the 'Responsibility to Protect,' and Double Standards

Reasonable people can disagree on the appropriateness of the decision by the United States and its NATO allies to attack Libya in the wake of the Gaddafi regime's offensive against rebel-held cities under the doctrine of "the responsibility to protect." Though the intervention likely prevented a slaughter, there is no guarantee that it won't simply protract a bloody military stalemate that could result in at least as many civilian deaths. There are any number of other legitimate concerns raised by those distressed over the fact that there is now a third country in the greater Middle East in which the United States has found itself at war. At the same time, there are also legitimate arguments being made by prominent human rights advocates arguing that there is still a moral imperative for the use of force to avoid a large-scale massacre by a criminal regime.

In any case, let's be clear: Even if one can justify the war on Libya on humanitarian grounds, this is probably not why it's actually being fought.

The establishment of a no-fly zone was supported by the League of Arab States, an organization composed primarily of pro-Western autocracies which have shown little hesitance in brutally suppressing their own pro-democracy struggles. There was initially a fair amount of popular support within many Arab countries -- even among some pro-democracy activists normally critical of U.S. interventionism -- for some limited outside assistance to prevent the Libyan opposition from being wiped out. However, the air and missile strikes have gone well beyond simply protecting civilians from bombings by pro-government forces to active support for an armed opposition. This, combined with the failure of rebels to take greater advantage of the large-scale outside support to regain the offensive, has resulted in growing nervousness, even from top officials. As Arab League secretary general [Amr Mussa](#) told reporters, "What has happened in Libya differs from the goal of imposing a no-fly zone and what we want is the protection of civilians and not bombing other civilians."

Despite its potential of being abused, the concept of an international "responsibility to protect" is both legally and morally valid in theory. National sovereignty should not provide a tyrant protection to unleash a genocidal campaign against his own people. However, as horrific as the military response by Gaddafi towards civilians in suppressing both armed and nonviolent forms of resistance against his autocratic rule, it would naïve to claim that foreign intervention is prompted by Western leaders' concern about protecting civilian lives. The United States, Great Britain and France have each allied with governments -- such as Guatemala, Indonesia, Colombia and Zaire -- which, in recent decades, have engaged in the slaughter of civilians as bad or worse as had been occurring in Libya.

The number of civilian casualties from Gaddafi's attacks is difficult to verify. Some estimates run as high as 8,000, some as low as 1,000, but most estimates put the number of civilians killed during the five weeks between the start of the uprising and the Western intervention country at approximately 1,700 people, roughly the same number of [civilians killed during Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon](#) and its [2008 war on the Gaza Strip](#) combined. Rather than referring those responsible to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or engage in military intervention to stop the slaughter, as has been the case of Libya, both the [U.S. Congress](#) and the administration vigorously defended Israel's assaults of heavily-populated civilian areas and condemned UN agencies and leading international jurists for documenting Israeli violations of international humanitarian law and for recommending that officials of both Israel and its Arab adversaries suspected of war crimes be referred to the ICC.

The principal intellectual advocate of the Responsibility to Protect is Gareth Evans, former head of the International Crisis Group, who has also emerged as one of the most vocal proponents of what he referred to as ["the overwhelming moral case"](#) for military intervention against Gaddafi. Ironically, as Australian foreign minister, Evans was a [major defender of Indonesia's genocidal war](#) against East Timor, which took the lives of over 200,000 civilians, and repeatedly downplayed and even covered up for Indonesian war crimes.

Hypocrisy and double-standards regarding military intervention does not automatically mean that military intervention in this case is necessarily wrong. Though many of us familiar with Libya remain dubious, it cannot be ruled out that events could transpire in such a way that this intervention could prove to have saved lives, brought stability, and promoted a democratic transition. However, it would be naïve to believe that the attacks on Libya are motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns. Certainly, there aren't many Libyans - even those who support foreign intervention on behalf of the uprising - who believe this. Ongoing U.S. support of the Yemeni and Bahraini regimes as they brutally suppress nonviolent pro-democracy protesters raises questions as to why the U.S. is so quick to intervene militarily against the Libyan regime suppressing an armed rebellion by those whose commitment to democracy in more suspect.

As a result, any honest debate on Libya should not be based just upon the question as to whether foreign military intervention is necessary to stop widespread repression. It should also be as to whether the United States should take sides in a civil war. It should also be as to whether democracy can be imposed through air strikes. It should also be as to whether the best way to overthrow dictators is through a foreign-backed armed uprising or -- as demonstrated in Egypt, Tunisia, Serbia, Chile, the Philippines, Indonesia, Poland and dozens of other countries -- whether the people of the affected countries themselves be allowed to do so through the power of mass strategic nonviolent action.