

What To Do About Libya?

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 2, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The crisis in Libya may have found its inspiration in the non-violent protests in Tunisia and Egypt, but it is now clear that non-violent protests will not dislodge this dictator, that Moammar Gaddafi intends to use, and is already using, all the violence at his command to retain power, that the United States completely lacks the kind of long-standing ties with senior military officials that might permit us to influence the stance of the Army, and that the opposition to Gaddafi is even less organized than the opposition to Mubarak. It is against these grim facts that those Libyans who are seeking to overthrow Gaddafi have now called for U.S. and other foreign military assistance to help them achieve their freedom.

What can and should the U.S. do?

First, the U.S. should never hide behind the arcane, slow, often inane processes by which the European nations organize their efforts. In the current crisis it is clear that rapidity is of even greater importance than the size of any military commitment. Helicopter gunships are fast and accomplish their grim massacres with shocking rapidity. The ways of Brussels are slow and plodding. If the U.S. does not lead, there will be no leadership.

Second, we should, through NATO or Security Council authorization if possible, announce and enforce a no-fly zone. This is an entirely defensive measure, designed to keep Gaddafi's planes and helicopter gunships from killing innocent civilians. Indeed, one of the things the United Nations should be working on is creating a few permanent squadrons of aircraft that can be deployed quickly to enforce no-fly zones. Increasingly, it is important that the international community focus not only on the justice of war, but on the prevention of war in the first place, and a U.N. sponsored no-fly zone enforcement capacity would go a long way towards keeping rogue actors in place.

Third, while the U.S. should never publicly say we will never send ground troops into Libya, our decision-makers should be acting on the premise that we will never send ground troops into Libya. The thought of having American military personnel fighting in a third Arab country is too horrific to contemplate. You would not need to be a marketing genius to devise the marketing campaign for Al-Qaeda based on that fact. Our involvement in the Arab world really would begin to look like a war on Islam no matter how much we said differently. If there is a need for ground forces, they should come from Egypt first, NATO second.

Neo-cons who pushed for the Iraq War must also admit that one of the consequences of the unnecessary war in Iraq, just because Chalaby said so, is that we are now unable to assist the authentic revolution in Libya. Americans are, understandably, war-weary and more focused on creating jobs in Trenton than fighting a war in Tripoli. Which is, in a sense, a shame. Horrible as Saddam was, Gaddafi is as bad or worse, but the difference is that the revolution in Libya is being led by Libyans and, just so, has a chance at success once the fighting stops. Our invasion of Iraq made that kind of homegrown democratic revolution less, not more, likely.

Finally, the U.S. should encourage the calls for Gaddafi to be indicted for crimes against humanity at the Hague. Oftentimes, in such situations, such indictments are counter-productive: A man who knows his fall from power will result in criminal prosecution will cling to power all the more tenaciously. But, in Gaddafi's case, it is clear

he is going to go down fighting and an indictment personalizes the battle between Gaddafi and the world. Why is that important? Because we want to convince his aides and his generals and others to jump ship, and if they see the West as interested primarily in getting Gaddafi, not investigating the complicity of his aides, they are more likely to abandon him to his fate. We can, simultaneously, warn those aides that going forward, their conduct will be subject to international investigation and prosecution, making the point even more forcefully.

The crisis in Libya is heart-breaking and, frankly, I fear my heart will be broken yet again, that in a month or two, when the fighting stops, Gaddafi will have defeated the opposition, murdered thousands, and we will all go on about our business, that we will end up feeling the way we did after Tiananmen Square not the way we did after the liberation of Kosovo. Committing ourselves to help enforce a no-fly zone is the quickest and most important way to avoid that unhappy scenario. Perhaps, further steps will become possible. But, the last thing the world needs is America at war in another Arab country. I just hope the brave Libyans protesting in the streets will not have to pay the price to avoid that scenario.

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