

Opinion

Libya: Politics of humanitarian intervention

The process of implementing the UN resolution on Libya was a poorly executed farce with no long-term foresight.

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Hillary Clinton apparently did not get the memo about the current situation in Libya when, on the topic of Bahrain, she said, 'Violence is not the answer, a political process is' [GALLO/GETTY]

Iraq and Afghanistan teach us that humanitarian intervention does not end with the removal of the danger it purports to target.

It only begins with it. Having removed the target, the intervention grows and turns into the real problem. This is why to limit the discussion of the Libyan intervention to its stated rationale – saving civilian lives – is barely scratching the political surface.

The short life of the Libyan intervention suggests that we distinguish between justification and execution in writing its biography. Justification was a process internal to the United Nations Security Council, but execution is not.

In addition to authorising a "no-fly zone" and tightening sanctions against "the Gaddafi regime and its supporters", Resolution 1973 called for "all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack in the country, including Benghazi." At the same time, it expressly "excluded a foreign occupation force of any form" or in "any part of Libyan territory".

UN conflicts

The UN process is notable for two reasons. First, the resolution was passed with a vote of 10 in favour and five

abstaining.

The abstaining governments – Russia, China, India, Brazil, Germany – represent the vast majority of humanity.

Even though the African Union had resolved against an external intervention and called for a political resolution to the conflict, the two African governments in the Security Council – South Africa and Nigeria – voted in favour of the resolution.

They have since echoed the sentiments of the governments that abstained, that they did not have in mind the scale of the intervention that has actually occurred.

The second thing notable about the UN process is that though the Security Council is central to the process of justification, it is peripheral to the process of execution.

The Russian and Chinese representatives complained that the resolution left vague "how and by whom the measures would be enforced and what the limits of the engagement would be."

Having authorised the intervention, the Security Council left its implementation to any and all, it "authorised Member States, acting nationally or through regional organisations or arrangements."

As with every right, this free for all was only in theory; in practise, the right could only be exercised by those who possessed the means to do so. As the baton passed from the UN Security Council to the US and NATO, its politics became clearer.

Money trail

When it came to the assets freeze and arms embargo, the Resolution called on the Secretary-General to create an eight-member panel of experts to assist the Security Council committee in monitoring the sanctions.

Libyan assets are mainly in the US and Europe, and they amount to hundreds of billions of dollars: the US Treasury froze \$30bn of liquid assets, and US banks \$18bn. What is to happen to interest on these assets?

The absence of any specific arrangement assets are turned into a booty, an interest-free loan, in this instance, to US Treasury and US banks.

Like the military intervention, there is nothing international about the implementing sanctions regime. From its point of view, the international process is no more than a legitimating exercise.

If the legitimization is international, implementation is privatised, passing the initiative to the strongest of member states. The end result is a self-constituted coalition of the willing.

War furthers many interests. Each war is a laboratory for testing the next generation of weapons. It is well known that the Iraq war led to more civilian than military victims.

The debate then was over whether or not these casualties were intended. In Libya, the debate is over facts. It points to the fact that the US and NATO are perfecting a new generation of weapons, weapons meant for urban warfare, weapons designed to minimise collateral damage.

The objective is to destroy physical assets with minimum cost in human lives. The cost to the people of Libya will be of another type. The more physical assets are destroyed, the less sovereign will be the next government in Libya.

Libya's opposition

The full political cost will become clear in the period of transition. The anti-Gaddafi coalition comprises four different political trends: radical Islamists, royalists, tribalists, and secular middle class activists produced by a Western-oriented educational system.

Of these, only the radical Islamists, especially those linked organisationally to Al Qaeda, have battle experience.

They – like NATO – have the most to gain in the short term from a process that is more military than political. This is why the most likely outcome of a military resolution in Libya will be an Afghanistan-type civil war.

One would think that this would be clear to the powers waging the current war on Libya, because they were the same powers waging war in Afghanistan. Yet, they have so far showed little interest in a political resolution. Several facts point to this.

The African Union delegation sent to Libya to begin discussions with Col. Gaddafi in pursuit of a political resolution to the conflict was denied permission to fly over Libya – and thus land in Tripoli – by the NATO powers.

The *New York Times* reported that Libyan tanks on the road to Benghazi were bombed from the air Iraq War-style, when they were retreating and not when they were advancing.

The two pilots of the US fighter jet F15-E that crashed near Benghazi were rescued by US forces on the ground, now admitted to be CIA operatives, a clear violation of Resolution 1973 that points to an early introduction of ground forces.

The logic of a political resolution was made clear by Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, in a different context: "We have made clear that security alone cannot resolve the challenges facing Bahrain. Violence is not the answer, a political process is."

That Clinton has been deaf to this logic when it comes to Libya is testimony that so far, the pursuit of interest has defied learning political lessons of past wars, most importantly Afghanistan.

Marx once wrote that important events in history occur, as it were, twice – the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. He should have added, that for its victims, farce is a tragedy compounded.

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