

Libyan military mission is a war of choice

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A couple of weeks ago, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird stopped in Benghazi to meet members of the rebel Libyan National Transitional Council. Baird was en route to Istanbul for a NATO meeting to discuss negotiating with the Brother Leader of Libya, Moammar Gadhafi.

Baird's account of his Benghazi talks, published in the National Post, is most revealing. "The international community was compelled to act," he said, "to protect the Libyan people."

Hence, the military mission, pledges of humanitarian aid and diplomatic efforts such as his visit to the transitional council leaders. In short, Libya, like Kosovo, Somalia, Haiti and, by some accounts, Iraq and Afghanistan, has become a humanitarian war.

The main point of such wars is to stop governments or factions that aim to become governments (such as the transitional council) from committing mass murder. They are not peacekeeping missions, though, like peacekeeping, they are optional - wars of choice they are often called.

This means that Canada, NATO and the "international community" was in no way compelled to act. By insisting on the opposite, Baird and other advocates of humanitarian war involve themselves in paradoxes, dilemmas and incoherencies. In Libya, intervention is intended not just to protect victims of the Gadhafi regime, but to achieve an objective that dares not speak its name: regime change. Obviously, such a purpose violates the semisacred principle of national self-determination and gives credence to Gadhafi's anticolonial narrative.

To say that the logic of humanitarian war requires the interveners to favour the weak is obvious. If they were capable of protecting themselves, they would not be facing mass murder in the first place. Likewise, the enemy against which the intervener fights will always be stronger. But why is Gadhafi so strong?

Of course he is a tyrant and we would like him to go away. Unfortunately, after ruling Libya for more than four decades, he shows a deep unwillingness to do so. We must recognize that tyrants are often popular and the majorities who support them are not always nice. Sometimes, they think they can solve all their woes by killing minorities. This dynamic rapidly becomes an insoluble problem for humanitarian war making: the limited goals of protecting a threatened minority turn into an attack on what many see as the legitimate government.

In the Libyan intervention, matters were propelled from difficult to nearly impossible by lawyers and their beloved International Criminal Court. The court is designed to try war criminals and no doubt Gadhafi is a likely candidate. The problem is, Gadhafi has no interest in a one-way ticket to The Hague. Because it is a purely legal body, which is the institutional dream of international lawyers, there can be no plea bargains and no country can offer Gadhafi amnesty. In other words, threats from the international court strengthen Gadhafi's will to continue fighting.

Baird said he was "impressed" by the "doctors and engineers, professionals and parents" on the National Transitional Council. Human Rights Watch reported that the council has also committed atrocities. Often, the only virtue of the weak is that they are not strong. What do we seriously think that the rebels might do to Gadhafi's supporters if they were powerful? In the face of such inconvenient facts, the humanitarians have recourse to the dream of nation building. Under our tutelage, the weak will learn moderation and justice, they say. Alas, new governments sustained by foreigners are seldom popular.

We can stay and fight for a long, long time - and not just by dropping bombs - or decamp and leave chaos. Even if you stay and get rid of a tyrant such as Saddam Hussein, the results are not clear. Has any humanitarian warrior wondered why the Iraqis show such little gratitude?

The incoherence of humanitarian war has one possible outcome: to draw the humanitarians ever deeper into the conflict. The other diplomats at Istanbul seem to have realized this. Let us hope Baird, who is new to the job, is as quick a study as people think he is.

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