



INTERVENTION IN LIBYA: A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT?

Events: In February 2011, a popular uprising erupted against President Gaddafi, as part of the Arab Spring. However, unlike earlier events in Tunisia and Egypt, the Gaddafi regime launched a brutal crackdown and pro-Gaddafi forces started to push eastward, threatening the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. Fearing a bloodbath, the international community responded swiftly. By the end of February, the UN Security Council had placed sanctions, an arms embargo and an asset freeze on Libya, and referred Gaddafi's crimes against humanity to the International Criminal Court in the Hague. On 17 March, the Security Council passed Resolution 1973, which mandated that 'all necessary measures' be taken to protect civilians'. Two days later, a US-led coalition launched air and missile strikes against Libyan forces, with responsibility for what was dubbed Operation Unified Protector quickly being transferred to NATO. In policing the arms embargo and patrolling the no-fly zone over Libya through aerial attacks on pro-Gaddafi forces and military equipment, NATO's intervention helped to tip the balance in the conflict in favour of the Libyan opposition. By early October, the Libyan National Transitional Council had secured control over the entire country and rebels had captured and killed Gaddafi. 'Operation Unified Protector' ended on 31 October, 222 days after it had begun.

Significance: The fact that major humanitarian interventions had not occurred since Kosovo and East Timor in 1999, and Sierra Leone in 2000 had encouraged some to believe that the era of humanitarian intervention was over, and that it had been a consequence of the unusual set of circumstances that had prevailed during the early post-Cold War period. The USA's involvement in prolonged counter-insurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also served to highlight the danger of states getting bogged down in military interventions, especially as, sooner or later, the so-called 'body bag effect' tends to weaken domestic support. The 2011 Libyan intervention, nevertheless, went ahead for two main reasons. First, the political leaderships in the USA, France and the UK, the key supporters of intervention, feared the political cost of being seen to stand passively by while widespread slaughter took place in Libya, particularly as they



had given such clear support to earlier Arab Spring uprisings. Second, and crucially, the intervention was deemed to be militarily feasible, both because of the relative weakness of the pro-Gaddafi forces once they were deprived of their aerial capacity, and in view of the calculation that intervention could be accomplished with minimal NATO losses, as a land invasion ('boots on the ground') could be avoided.

The key moral justification for the Libyan intervention arose from the principle of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), even though the notion was not specifically cited in UN Resolution 1973. The core theme of R2P is that the international community is bound by a humanitarian imperative to intervene to protect civilians in the event of either an actual or apprehended large-scale loss of life, or large-scale ethnic cleansing, if the resources exist to do so and the cost is not disproportionate to the outcome. As moral responsibilities extend, potentially, to the whole of humanity, we have an obligation to 'save strangers' in distress wherever they may be. In the case of Libya, this moral justification was bolstered by the legitimacy the intervention derived from its authorization by the Security Council and the support of key regional bodies such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Critics of the intervention have nevertheless portrayed Libya as an example of neocolonialism, on the grounds that it was significantly motivated by the desire to gain control of oil and other resources, and also reflected a continuing attempt by Western powers to control the destiny of developing states. In this light, R2P merely provides a moral cloak for self-seeking behaviour, and it is invoked only when it suits the purposes of Western states. In other cases, such as Syria during 2011–12, the principle is conveniently ignored.