

# The Consequences of Inaction in Libya

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**To deal with the possibility that Qaddafi and his loyalists will use all the force at their disposal before giving in, with an escalation of violence in Libya, the United States and EU should seek UN Security Council authorization for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya.**

**T**he sanctions which have been placed on Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, his family members, and his senior officials are strong. They include asset freezes, travel bans, and threats of criminal prosecution. All of which add up to a powerful signal to the Libyan regime that the war it is waging on its own people is illegitimate and unacceptable, and to the Libyan people that our sympathy is with them and we will act to prevent their national assets from being pillaged. The world is now a considerably less inviting place for Libyan officials, who have been known to carouse in the capitals of Europe, the Caribbean, and elsewhere.

But therein a problem lies. The strategy followed thus far by the United States and its allies may persuade many Libyan officials that there is no future in following Qaddafi and therefore, defection to the opposition or negotiating an exit from Libya altogether is the most sensible course of action. But for others, especially those closest to Qaddafi, the sanctions and threats of international prosecution, combined with the advance of opposition forces, may convince them that they have little choice but to hunker down in Tripoli and Sirte and fight.

To deal with this possibility that Qaddafi and his loyalists will use all of the force at their disposal before giving in, and that the violence in Libya may therefore get considerably worse, further international action is needed. The United States and EU should seek U.N. Security Council authorization for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya.

We have heard much from U.S. officials in recent days about the risks of imposing a no-fly zone, but inaction also has its consequences.

Qaddafi has used warplanes against the opposition in recent days, and there is little indication that he will cease doing so as long as it is an option. This not only increases the chances of mass casualties, but it will extend the

conflict as the relatively lightly-armed and poorly-trained rebels worry about advancing while Qaddafi has such armaments at his disposal. As the fighting drags on and the violence deepens, the risk that extremist groups will enter the fray as they have in other conflicts in the region increases as well, which has serious implications for our future relations with whatever Libya that emerges from the fighting.

Inaction also strikes a blow to U.S. credibility. On Capitol Hill March 2, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the "stakes are high" in Libya, which she warned could become a "giant Somalia." The United States has "joined the Libyan people in demanding that Colonel Qaddafi must go now, without further violence or delay," she asserted. Yet it is not clear to the world that we have joined the Libyan people in doing anything about it. Our sanctions will work indirectly and over the long term. Our warships are standing off the coast of Libya, but taking no part in the struggle there. This perception -- that we can help but have chosen not to, despite calls from the Libyan opposition to impose a no-fly zone -- is one we may rue for years to come.

The reasons provided by senior U.S. officials for not imposing a no-fly zone in Libya seem pale in comparison to their descriptions of the stakes in Libya. They have said that imposing a no-fly zone would be complicated and would not account for fighting on the ground. These are prudent points, but they make better arguments for a smartly-crafted intervention than for doing nothing. There are well-grounded fears that a no-fly zone could turn into a long-term commitment (like the one over Iraq in the 1990s) if a stalemate develops. But this risk must be weighed against the potential of a no-fly zone to bring the conflict to an earlier end, keeping in mind that a protracted conflict will carry costs for U.S. national security regardless of whether we are directly involved. U.S. officials have also questioned whether aircraft are being used by Qaddafi against civilians, or whether the Libyan opposition wants a no-fly zone. Recent news reports undermine both points. Likewise, fears that Russia and China would veto a no-fly zone in the Security Council should not deter us from putting the question to them.

Other reasons given for our inaction are less persuasive. Secretary of Defense Gates questioned the wisdom of taking action in "another country in the Middle East," and Secretary Clinton suggested that there are messages on websites that the United States intends to "invade for oil." We cannot allow such canards to guide U.S. foreign policy.

From Tunisia to Egypt to Bahrain to Libya, the world has been wondering where the United States stands. It was on Feb. 23 that President Obama said regarding Libya that the United States would "stand up for freedom, stand up for justice, and stand up for the dignity of all people." And on Feb. 25 Secretary Clinton asserted that, "This is a time for action. Now is the opportunity for us to support all who are willing to stand up on behalf of the rights we claim to cherish." On Mar. 2, she observed that the events in the region demanded a "strong and strategic response." They were right, but so far our actions have not matched these words.

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