

Intervention in Libya: Example of “R2P” or Classic Realism?

Written by Harry Kazianis

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HARRY KAZIANIS, JUN 6 2011

According to Alex Bellamy, Professor of Political Science at Griffith University,

“In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) called for a profound change to the way in which the world responded to the problem of mass atrocities. Instead of a debate about the so-called right of humanitarian intervention, the commission called for a responsibility to protect and with it a focus on protecting the victims of mass atrocities” (Bellamy, 2011).

The ICISS report laid the ground work for the conceptualization of the ideas of the “Right to Protect” or “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine (sometimes called R2P for short). Several years later, the world would be tested to see if such a doctrine would be utilized. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi is locked into a violent clash with opposition freedom fighters centered in Benghazi, the second largest city in Libya. Libyan forces have used brutal tactics including the deliberate rape of women, the purposeful attacking of civilians, and the brutal torture of enemy combatants. Western nations along with other partners from around the globe have sponsored various United Nations resolutions with the intent of stopping the crisis and are now intervening militarily. Multiple scholars have labeled the crisis in Libya a test case of the “Right/Responsibility to Protect” doctrine (Focarelli, 2011). Many have hailed this intervention as a new era in international relations with “R2P” as a new normative principle (Focarelli, 2011). President Obama would remark, “Today we are part of a broad coalition. We are answering the calls of a threatened people. And we are acting in the interests of the United States and the world” (Obama, 2011).

Various violent clashes have broken out all over the Middle East. Governments of nations such as Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and a variety of others have used armed violence against unarmed citizens. Yet, there are very few calls for intervention in those situations. Why was Libya chosen for intervention? There are various reasons why intervention in Libya is not based on the “R2P” ethical concept that various international relations scholars have theorized. I argue this conflict is rooted in the ethical ideas and foreign policy doctrine of realism and the national self-interest of the various nations attacking Libya. The conflict in Libya has little to do with the injection of ethics or humanitarian aid into international relations. This conflict is rooted in classical national interest or *realpolitik* that dates back to Thucydides, Machiavelli and various other realist advocates we have studied in class. “R2P” is merely a cover for the true realist policy aims intervening nations have in Libya.

Why Realism?

Having a clear understanding of the true motivations of intervening powers in Libya is important for various reasons. Libya occupies a close proximity to Europe and holds vital natural resources that power the European economy. Europe also fears that if Gaddafi were to win the conflict in Libya, he could return his nation to being a sponsor of state terrorism. Libya also still has access to chemical weapons. None of the other nations that have joined the “Arab Spring” movements have such importance or clearly defined interests at stake. While nations in Europe try to explain their actions as rooted in saving the Libyan people and preventing mass slaughter, there are clear issues of national self interest that are a much better explanation of this intervention. This is ultimately why realism is a better explanation for intervention than a perceived right or responsibility to protect.

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What is “R2P”?

In order to understand how the conflict in Libya is not an example of the application of “R2P” with realism being a better fit, one must have a clear understanding of what “R2P” exactly is. The “Right to Protect” or “Responsibility to Protect” concept is laid out in three principles. According to the The Stanley Foundation’s report on the subject these include,

- “1. The responsibility of each individual state to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and their incitement.
2. The responsibility of the international community to encourage and help states to exercise this responsibility and to help states build capacity to protect their populations, as appropriate.
3. The responsibility of the international community to be prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner in accordance with the United Nations Charter, on a case-by-case basis, and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should the above preventive means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity” (Stanley Foundation, 2010).

The “Right to Protect” concept was created to insure that genocide and the protection of civilians is an important part of the international system. K. Kesavapany of the East Asian Forum noted, “These admirable principles seek to strike a balance between the sovereignty of states and the human rights of citizens. The aim of “R2P” is to help states protect their people; but when states turn on their own citizens, the rest of the world has the responsibility to protect them. States cannot hide behind sovereignty to declare war on their own citizens and get away with it” (Kesavapany, 2011).

With so many nations in revolt with various governments attacking and killing their own citizens, there would seem to be many places that would be prime examples for the application of the above principles. Oddly enough, there have been very few calls to intervene in many of the various “Arab Spring” revolutions. For some it is a question of alliances, “If Libya, then why not Yemen and Bahrain? The answer is obvious of course; it is a question of alliances. Bahrain is an ally for the West and action against the regime there would result in the strengthening of the Shiite majority and shift power in the region toward Iran.” (Hillstorm, 2011). The underlying argument this author is making is that alliances, built on realist concepts, stops possible intervening powers from acting. I believe it is realism guided by pure national interest in the area of natural resources, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction that have led to the intervention in Libya.

Oil: The “Fuel” of a Realist Intervention

There are various pieces of evidence one can use to demonstrate that realist aims are the true foundation of the Libyan intervention and not “R2P”. One of the most significant realist aims for intervention is the importance Libya has for European energy markets. Libya holds around 46.4 billion barrels of oil reserves, the largest in Africa and in close proximity to Europe (US EIA, 2011). Libya produced an estimated 1.8 million barrels per day bbl/d of oil in 2010, of which 1.5 million bbl/d were exported (US EIA, 2011). The Libyan government planned to increase its oil reserves, increase production to 3 million barrels a day by 2020, and further develop its natural gas sector as a way to spur recovery from U.S. and international economic sanctions in the 1980’s and 1990’s (John, 2011). The United Nations in 2003 and later the United States in 2004 lifted sanctions on Libya. In 2006, the United States rescinded Libya’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. Since then, various western energy companies have looked to increase investment in natural resource exploration.

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Not All Oil is Created Equal

With oil being a focus in a realist explanation for intervention, one must also look to the uniqueness of Libyan oil. Libyan oil is extremely distinctive and very hard to replace. The blend and chemical makeup of Libya's oil reserves are not widely found throughout the world and difficult to replicate. According to Philip Verleger, an oil economist at the University of Calgary, in an interview for National Public Radio details that not oil is created equal. He explains, “It happens that Libyan crude has almost no sulfur and produces a great deal of diesel fuel per barrel of crude, which means it is very valued” (Joyce, 2011). “One can think of it as fat-free milk” (Joyce, 2011) Libyan oil is of a light and sweet mixture that is rare. It is of such a blend that refineries look for this oil for making low-sulfur diesel. This is widely desired in Europe. The United States also uses such fuels to create jet fuel (Joyce, 2011). Europe and the United States also have a preference for this blend of oil as both demand low-sulfur fuel because it pollutes less (Joyce, 2011). Libyan crude also on average only costs \$1.00 a barrel to refine (Joyce, 2011). This makes it even more desirable and coveted. It is almost irreplaceable on world oil markets.

Couldn't Saudi Arabia Replace Libyan Oil?

Many in the western media have tried to show that Saudi Arabia could replace this oil on world markets. That is not the case. Professor Verleger also explains, “So the loss of the Libyan crudes may not be easily replaced by just boosting Saudi production” Verleger says (Joyce, 2011). “In theory you might need 4 barrels of Saudi crude for 2 barrels of Libyan crude to get the same amount of diesel, but if you don't have the capacity to take out the sulfur, the Saudi crude is useless” (Joyce,2011). One must also consider higher transportation costs in delivering this fuel to Europe, transit fees through the Suez Canal, and the added cost to remove sulfur and refining costs. This all equates to higher costs for European consumers. With such a precious source of oil just south of Europe's shores, one can see the true value of such a resource.

Europe's Use of Libyan Natural Resources

Another possible motive for a realist intervention in Libya is the proximity and overall importance Libyan oil is to Europe's economy and the percentage of oil and other resources that come from Libya. Approximately 85% of Libya's oil exports were purchased by Italy, France, Great Britain and Spain. Of these nations, Italy received over 28% of its total oil imports from Libya which amount to 370,000 barrels of oil per day (The Economist, 2011). France receives 17% of its oil from Libya, along with Great Britain who receives 8% of its oil from Libya as well (The Economist, 2011).

Libya also has expanded tremendously its natural gas output. It exclusively sold all of its natural gas to Europe before the crisis began. Libya has 55 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of proven natural gas reserves (US EIA, 2011). Libya produced an estimated 562 billion cubic feet (Bcf) of dry natural gas in 2009, one third of which is domestically consumed (US EIA,2011). Libya exports the remainder of its natural gas. The International Energy Agency before the crisis began estimated that by 2012, Libyan production could have increased by as much as 50 percent if planned pipelines and gas-fired power plants would have been built (US EIA, 2011).

Natural gas exports to European nations have developed considerably since 2004. This expansion was driven through a new 370-mile underwater “Greenstream” natural gas pipeline. The pipeline sends natural gas from Melitah, Libya to Gela, Sicily (US EIA, 2004). From Sicily, the natural gas flows to the Italian mainland and to other European countries. Before Libyan natural gas stopped flowing through this pipeline on February 22, 2011, as much as 25 million cubic meters of natural gas flowed to Europe in this one pipeline alone (Wyatt, 2011).

Europe Now More Dependent of Gazprom

There are vast consequences for European energy markets now that for the time being they have lost access to Libyan oil and natural gas deliveries. Since the crisis started, there has been a fear that Libya would suspend oil and natural gas shipments to Europe. Libya did in fact halt gas exports to Italy on Feb. 22 and to the rest of Europe several days later. European nations will now have to look to Russia's Gazprom to increase natural gas deliveries.

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According to Ian Wyatt, “Already, Europe is at the mercy of Russian natural gas. And this dependence means that natural gas prices in Europe are more than twice the price of natural gas here in the United States (2011). This is a sensitive topic for Europeans who will now have to look to this one Russian company for more natural gas supplies. Italy receives over 23% of its gas from the Russian giant, France receives 21% of its supplies from Gazprom as well (2011). Some nations such as Finland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic receive over 80% of their oil from Gazprom (2011). Because of the crisis, Europe has lost an extremely valuable oil and natural gas provider and is further indebted to Russia natural gas supplies. Considering the tumultuous history of Russian/European relations, this is an unsatisfactory situation.

Oil Prices Have Risen Dramatically Since Libyan Conflict Began

Another point to consider is the solid increase in oil prices since the conflict in Libya began. While Libyan oil production is only two percent of total world oil output, oil traders fear the “Arab Spring” movement of revolution could spread to other nations and cause even larger oil disruptions. USA Today noted that since the beginning of the conflict oil prices had risen about \$20 a barrel by March, 2011 with automobile gasoline prices rising about 50 cents a gallon (Davidson, 2011). In an interview to MSNBC, Energy consultant Jim Ritterbusch said a “fear premium” has added about \$10 per barrel to the price of oil (Kahn, 2011). Paul Sullivan of The New Republic remarked, “What’s more, it’s not just actual events that affect oil prices, but potential events and senses of risk—and with all that’s been happening in the Middle East and elsewhere, oil markets are extremely jittery” (Sullivan, 2011). There is also very little excess oil producing capacity with only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates able to make up for any oil producing short falls. This has all combined to increase the price of oil crude futures from 85.00 a barrel on February 15th 2011 to a high of 113.90 a barrel on April 29th (Post1, 2011).

Libyan Return to Terrorism if Qaddafi Wins

Another realist explanation for the intervention in Libya is the possibility that Libya could return to being a state sponsor of terrorism. This would be a major concern to European nations who are in close proximity to Libya. If Gaddafi’s forces were to win such a conflict it may very well become a conduit of terrorism similar to its activities of the 1980’s. According to the Robert Looney’s Handbook of US Middle-East Relations, “ With the exception of the enmity toward Iraq during the *fin de regne* of Saddam Hussein, no other Middle Eastern country suffered such bad relations with the US as Libya from the 1970’s to the early 2000’s” (Looney,2009). According to Christopher Boucek at the Jamestown Foundation,

“For decades, the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi maintained a well documented history of extensive state sponsorship of terrorism. Tacit support, close cooperation, and moral encouragement for a number of terrorist movements and organizations throughout the years have often times served a number of shifting Libyan interests. Indeed the employment of different terrorist groups by the Libyan government was an intrinsic feature of its foreign policy for a number of years and at one point even propelled it into direct military confrontation with the United States. Throughout the years, Libyan ambitions in the Arab and Muslim worlds, as well as aspirations for influence throughout Africa, have been the main drivers of Libyan support for international terrorism” (Boucek,2011).

Libya has in the last several years made large strides to reverse its terrorist past. It has negotiated and settled international claims such as the Lockerbie bombing over Scotland. Libya was a loyal partner in the “war on terror” and agreed in 2003 to eliminate all of its research and development towards all forms of weapons of mass destruction. Libyan rehabilitation of its international image was so great that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would host Libya’s National Security Advisor in Washington on April 21, 2009. She would remark, “We deeply value the relationship between the United States and Libya. We have many opportunities to deepen and broaden our cooperation” (Mason, 2011). If Libya were to return to its former state of terrorist sponsor with its close proximity to Europe, this would cause major problems for Europe.

Libya Still has Chemical Weapons

There is also the very real danger that Libya may use its remaining stockpiles of chemical weapons against its own

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people or in a terrorist attack against western powers. In 2003, Libya agreed to remove and dismantle all of its weapons of mass destruction. Libya did remove a vast majority of its nuclear, biological and chemical agents. However, Libya has been slow to completely disarm and still has large quantities of Mustard Gas. In an article for the Washington Post, the situation was detailed,

“Libya until recently had been on track to destroy the remaining stock (of Mustard Gas) by itself before May 15 at the Rughawa site, more than 130 miles south of Sirte, Gaddafi’s birthplace. The canisters presently hold about half of the arsenal the government declared it had in 2004, in a general renunciation of its weapons of mass destruction under heavy U.S. and British pressure. The Libyan government halted the process in February (2011)” (Smith, 2011)

Libya also has multiple Scud B Missiles to deploy such weapons (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2011). In an interview to the Washington Post, Libya’s former ambassador to the United Nations Mohamed Shalgham explained, “I do expect that he’s going to attack Benghazi with chemical weapons” if the fighting eventually reaches there (Smith, 2011). In the same article unnamed US sources remarked, “There are lots of rational reasons why Gaddafi could decide not to use them — not the least of which is the absence of a reliable and safe delivery method — but we all know that rational decision-making is not always the hallmark of dictators” (Smith, 2011). Another unnamed U.S. official said in the same interview “It will come down to a decision by one man on how to proceed” (Smith, 2011)

Realism is the Best Explanation for Libyan Intervention

The intervention in Libya is being portrayed in the media as an attempt to save the Libyan people from destruction at the hands of a brutal and oppressive regime. When one looks at the evidence, various interests and geopolitical concerns confronting intervening nations, another motive emerges. Intervening nations, specifically those of European nations in close proximity to Libya, have vital national interests at stake in the conflict. If Gaddafi were to win, vital oil and natural resources that power large parts of Europe’s economy would vanish for the foreseeable future with Libya possibly returning to terrorism with a small arsenal of chemical weapons at its disposal. Realism is the best explanation for the motives and explanations of this intervention. Let there be no doubt, intervening powers are looking to assist the Libyan people and ensure they are not being slaughtered at the hands of Gaddafi. However, what drives nations such as France, Great Britain, and even the former colonial master of Libya, Italy to intervene in such a matter is their national interest. This may be the difference in intervening in this conflict as opposed to all the other “Arab Spring” movements that have sprung up around the globe. On March 28th, 2011 President Obama declared in a speech to the world on Libya, “We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi, a city nearly the size of Charlotte, could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world. It was not in our national interest to let that happen. I refused to let that happen” (Obama, 2011). I believe the President when he and other members of the intervention in Libya say that they want to help innocent civilians from slaughter. That being said, realistically, I believe the reasons for intervening in Libya have more to do with national interest and realism than the stated humanitarian goals of the mission.

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