

Humanitarian Intervention in Libya: Not Clash of Civilizations

Written by Afa'anwi Ma'abo Che

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AFA'ANWI MA'ABO CHE, DEC 13 2013

'... A vicious cycle of violence has indeed been triggered by the intervention of NATO in Libya [...]. Under the circumstances of today's cultural diversity, at national as well as international level, interventionist policies, even if intended for "humanitarian" purposes, may bring about a "clash of civilizations" as unintended consequence' (Koechler 2012).

Have ideological and economic conflicts of the Cold and pre-Cold War epochs been eclipsed by cultural clashes in the post-Cold War era? Are we living Huntington's (1993, 1996) clash of civilizations (CoC)? Debates on the credibility of Huntington's CoC prognosis remain dominant in World Politics scholarship, with evaluative empirical evidence mixed. Following NATO's military intervention to halt (former state leader) Muammar Gaddafi's ruthless repression of popular protests in Libya (2011), UK and US diplomatic officials in that country have been violently attacked, with former US ambassador Christopher Stevens assassinated (Harding and Stephen 2012). As quoted above, Hans Koechler, President of the International Progress Organization (IPO) – member-organization of the World Public Forum promoting 'Dialogue among Civilizations' (WPFDC) – has critically portrayed the assaults as a CoC indirectly resulting from NATO's intervention. Mindful of the IPO's consultative partnership with the UN, Koechler's standpoint potentially threatens future interventions for protection purposes, especially as the UN wields overarching authority to mandate such interventions under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm. Koechler's implicit condemnation of the R2P-motivated intervention in Libya stands in stark contrast to popular commendations (both in scholarly and policy circles) of the intervention as a 'blue print' for future armed protection operations. Some of those acclamations have been documented on this very website (Hehir 2012). This brief argumentative piece reiterates the integrity of R2P-based intervention in Libya by debunking Koechler's apparent association of the intervention with Huntington's CoC as specious.

A superficial reading of NATO's Libyan intervention, spearheaded by US, British and French forces, could incorrectly suggest a CoC (West vs. Arabs). This is particularly the case if drawing on Huntington's predominantly primordialist perception of cultural diversity – as a direct source of adversity. But, critically considered, the Western-led Libyan bombardment bears no evidence for a CoC. Instead, cross-civilizational cooperation and intra-civilizational dissensions were evinced. Gaddafi's sympathizers in the Libyan Armed Forces (LAF) were mostly Arabs, but so were his adversaries in the insurgent Free Libyan Army (FLA) and the National Transitional Council (NTC). Global media coverage of Gaddafi's repulsive assaults on pro-democracy protesters instrumentally incensed the wider Arab world and engineered Arab harmony against Gaddafi. Thus, in striking contrast to CoC anticipations, most of the Arab world partnered the West in its military humanitarian campaign. The famous UN Security Council's Resolution 1973 which proclaimed Libyan airspace a no-fly zone 'to help protect civilians' (article 6) was admittedly initiated by Western powers (Britain and France), but its adoption and imposition was solicited and supported by Arab organizations, namely: the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (Bellamy and Williams 2011: 839 – 840, Bronner and Sanger 2011, Maddy-Wietzman 2012). Arab backing of Resolution 1973 punctured quibbling Chinese, German and Russian opposition to armed intervention in Libya. Also, it helped to dissolve apparent initial US hesitation to engage militarily in yet another Islamic state after the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). The proactive support of the Arab world for Western-led operations in Libya substantiates Arab – Western collaboration, not inter-civilizational clashes.

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Within the West, intra-civilizational unity was attenuated by Germany's 'very sceptical' stance on the no-fly zone Resolution (Tisdall 2011). In fact, 2011 was not the first time the West appeared divided on its policies towards Gaddafi. Previously, the Libyan autocrat secretly pursued a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program and was blacklisted a sponsor of terrorism by the US. However, successive US governments dealt with Gaddafi differently. Bill Clinton's administration diplomatically engaged the Libyan leader while its successor threatened military action under what became known as the Bush Doctrine. Under Tony Blair's leadership, the UK supported the Bush Doctrine and joined the US in bombarding Iraq while France and Germany overtly opposed their fellow allies. Hostility in Libyan – Western (Gaddafi – Bush/Blair) relations was evidently not a CoC as hospitality and warmth resurfaced almost immediately after Gaddafi abandoned his nuclear ambitions, renounced terrorism and compensated victims of the radical Lockerbie bombing. Gaddafi's desertion of radicalism earned him cheerful tête-à-têtes with US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and (former) British Prime Minister, Tony Blair (BBC March 25, 2004). Also there was hardly any indication of a CoC when the US ejected Libya from its blacklist at the turn of the century (Kaplan 2007).

When Western relations with Libya relapsed in 2011, humanitarian concerns and not inter-cultural antipathies inspired NATO's strikes. After all: i) the UN Security Council implicitly invoked R2P to justify and authorize the intervention by first 'reiterating [in Resolution 1973] the responsibility of the Libyan authorities to protect the Libyan population', before 'expressing its determination to ensure the protection of civilians';[1] ii) NATO intervened in Libya but steered clear of Algeria, despite both states concurrently enduring political riots, sharing Islamic cultures and depending on oil economies, but responding differently to the riots, with Gaddafi opting for military repression, relative to liberal reforms by Bouteflika's regime in Algeria; iii) in Syria, another Arab state, despite the ongoing civil war, the country remains under President Assad, and seems unlikely to suffer intervention, mainly as a function of severe divisions in the UN Security Council vis-à-vis Syria, though Western realist (cost and benefits) calculations have also been evoked by Katz (2012). Jointly, all three points (i, ii, iii) vindicate the West as willing to undertake protection interventions, but not without international backing within the UN system. It is exactly such a multilateral approach to protection interventions that the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) prescribed in its formulation of R2P (ICISS 2001). Relative to unilateral interventions, multilateral designs ostensibly harbour more safeguards against economically egoistic and culturally/civilizationally imperialistic manipulations and moralistic condemnations.

Conclusively, facts of the NATO-led intervention in Libya do not corroborate the correlation Koechler makes between the intervention and Huntington's CoC. In the unlikely event that the UN and the international community entertain Koechler's thesis, it would perniciously be a step backwards rather than forward towards complete and sustained realization of R2P. Fortunately, the popular adage 'better safe than sorry' bears timeless wisdom and is instructive here. As learned from Libya, armed interventions to end or avert mass killings can be costly in terms of human and infrastructural casualties. However, inaction, even if rationalised by fears of perpetrating inter-civilizational clashes, are just as costly, if not more so.

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[1] These quotes from Resolution 1973 clearly reflect two fundamental principles underlying the R2P doctrine drafted by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS 2001, xi): first and foremost, under R2P, each state bears 'primary responsibility for the protection of its people'; but, where a state is failing to fulfil that responsibility, it becomes an 'international responsibility', ultimately sanctioned by the UN Security Council (p. xii).

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Afa'anwi Ma'abo Che holds a Ph.D in Politics from Swansea University, UK. He is a winner of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies – China Africa Research Initiative's research grant/fellowship for 2019. Afa'anwi is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Peace Studies and the Deputy Director of postgraduate studies at Kampala International University, Uganda. He has published in reputable outlets, including the UN-affiliated Peace and Conflict Review, Peace and Conflict Studies, International Journal on World Peace and on E-IR.