

Military intervention against Gaddafi might shake the regime in Iran

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, MAR 18 2011

Recent mutterings in the western corridors of power for an intervention in Libya are now being translated into a potential reality. At the time of writing, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to establish a No Fly Zone over parts of Libya. When the whispering started, there was doubt if the Arab world would endorse the idea. After all, most Arab countries are still ruled by dictators: if they endorsed a military intervention against Gaddafi, sooner or later wouldn't they find themselves a victim of the same precedent? However, even the Arab League with the exception of Syria and Algeria has now supported the idea of a no-fly zone over Libya, as the pro-government forces are making some noticeable advances in the country. Now that western capitals have reached a consensus with the Arab world to intervene, Tehran may well perceive this as a threat against its own survival.

Of course, there are some major differences between Iran and Libya. When it comes to the issues of geo-politics, demography, civil-military relations, political organization, ideology and social infrastructure, these two countries do not much resemble each other. Needless to say, Libya is a highly tribal society while the social composition of Iran is more class-based. Iran is an ideological theocracy with a complex hierocratic, civil and military infrastructure, while for the last forty years, Libya has vested itself in eclectic if not confused ideas such as Arab nationalism, socialism, Islamism, Third Worldism and pan-Africanism.

Yet, the similarities between the two states make the current international mobilization against Gaddafi unsettling for Tehran. Iran seems to be aware of such similarities and is following the unfolding events with deep interest. There are three characteristics that the two countries arguably share. First, in terms of regional dynamics, Iran shares a similar position as Libya. As the recent diplomatic correspondence leaked by Wikileaks suggested, many regional leaders would be happy to see some military action taken against the Islamic Republic. The Arab world has been equally weary with Libya over the last four decades. Gaddafi too has never hesitated to antagonize his Arab counterparts, particularly more conservative states such as Saudi Arabia who have generally been highly suspicious of Gaddafi's radical policies. Iran and Libya share regional isolation to some degree and both lack major strategic alliances in the area.

The second factor concerns the United States and wider western world. Of course, the west is not homogenous but at least some of the western countries would play a crucial part in any military operation. Over the last few decades Iran and Libya have been equally challenging for the west. Both states have been accused of sponsoring terrorism and their antagonistic anti-western policies have lost them their friends in western capitals. Although, lately there was a 'rapprochement' between Libya and the West which entailed new business opportunities, Gaddafi was still seen as "the mad dog of the Middle East". Of course, the repressive nature of both regimes alone does not make them prone to an external threat, as many western allies in the region remain oppressive and undemocratic. Nevertheless, their image as 'rogue states' paved the way for the possibility of military intervention against them under different pretexts.

Thirdly, there are the internal dynamics. The Islamic Republic has been increasingly resorting to repression to maintain the status quo in a similar way to the government of Gaddafi. These repressive policies have led to the loss of legitimacy. In both regimes, people who have been part of the establishment are now leading the opposition. Apart

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from a small minority benefiting from the survival of the regime the vast majority of people in both countries seem increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo.

Since the Arab uprising began, Iranian officials have continuously warned against western intervention. As the possibility of a military intervention against Gaddafi becomes more imminent, Tehran shows its sensitivity towards any such action. Lately, President Ahmadinejad warned that a western military intervention would create a graveyard for the aggressors, stating that, "(The US) used a deception named September 11 to create a pretext for the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan." and it cannot use any other pretext to invade any other country in the region. The west, he threatened, " if you intervene militarily one more time, in any of the countries in North Africa or the Middle East, the regional nations will rise and dig the graves of your soldiers."

Of course, the idea of 'absolute sovereignty' is no longer viable in the international system and already there are precedents for humanitarian intervention to stop the grave violation of human rights. Nonetheless, the situation in Libya differs in a significant fashion from the Balkan wars which ultimately provoked western intervention. The situation in Libya is about the struggle between a repressive dictator and an opposition movement which demands transparency and representation. This struggle parallels the one that Tehran has been facing with the Green Movement. Although, there is no civil war in Iran, there has been the heavy-handed use of violence to repress the opposition, with always the possibility of using more extreme violence in the near future.

Iranian hardliners are afraid that their current repressive policies could be used as a pretext for military intervention. Iran sees the pro-democracy sentiments of the west as an excuse for exerting pressure on the Islamic Republic. Although the Iranian opposition symbolically attempts to distant itself from the outside, the regime knows that a military intervention in Libya could have serious implications for the regime in Tehran.

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