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Aiding Libya More Than Arming Rebels

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Washington was wrong to focus myopically on the decision to intervene in Libya and establish a “no-fly” zone. Long before operations began, it was abundantly clear that these operations would not be militarily decisive. The current situation on the ground now bears out that fact. A more comprehensive strategy is required to deal with the Qadhafi regime, bring liberty to Libya, and make a real and lasting contribution to protecting innocents rather than just the temporary reprieve achieved by hasty military intervention. Now, rather than dealing with these long-term issues, Washington is compounding the mistake by single-mindedly obsessing on another ad hoc decision: whether or not arms should be provided to the opposition.

This option, absent an overall game plan for the next steps in Libya, is ill-conceived. Decisions on the way forward should be made in the context of accomplishing three key tasks: (1) keeping Qadhafi isolated until he is brought to justice, (2) establishing a military presence to keep his forces from driving the opposition into the sea, and (3) identifying, supporting, and sustaining a legitimate opposition that brings democracy to the country (rather than letting it become the next terrorist haven) and looks after the humanitarian needs and human rights of the people under its control.

The President Speaks. In his speech to the nation last Monday, President Barack Obama, for the first time since combat operations began during the preceding week, outlined a limited role for the direct use of U.S. military force. He also sug-

gested the list of key tasks that had to be accomplished. However, the President ignored some key considerations:

- More important than *when* Qadhafi is brought to justice is *how* his regime ends. This task would best be accomplished in a manner that safeguards the future liberty of Libya and ensures the maximum protection of innocents. To the greatest extent possible, this should be done by Libyans themselves, because they have suffered the most from the Qadhafi regime’s terrorism and have the strongest motivation to fight. The U.S. can provide various forms of support if it finds suitable Libyan leaders to back.
- Until the regime ends, Qadhafi’s force must be kept at bay. Since the date when this might occur is uncertain, a durable and sustainable means to offset the regime’s remaining military might must be established.
- Support must be given only to those who are worthy—indigenous groups and leaders with intent, will, and capacity to look after the interests of the Libyan people who will combat the inevitable effort by extremists and terrorists to circumvent the nation’s pursuit of freedom.

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Where the President's speech proved wholly inadequate was in utterly failing to suggest how these vital tasks would be accomplished other than blithely promising that they would be undertaken by the international community.

Regardless of what nations bear the costs and burdens of performing these tasks, they will never be done right—or at all, for that matter—without the strong American leadership needed to establish and sustain an effective coalition of the willing and able. As the 1992–1993 Somalian intervention demonstrated, relegating decision-making to a U.N.-backed committee is a formula for adopting rigid, reactive, and lowest-common-denominator policies that sometimes have disastrous consequences.

Arms and Conflict. No aspect of the mission requires greater leadership than the effort to build the capacity of the opposition—a task that includes much more than simply providing arms. This effort, however, should be perceived not as “nation-building” or a Marshall Plan but as a bare-bones, immediate, adaptive, and minimal effort to help the opposition provide essential governance and security. It is really about establishing a modicum of capacity in a society ravaged by more than four decades of Qadhafi's disastrous rule.

First, it would be a grave error to simply arm an opposition and neglect the other essential duties necessary to build the capacity for Libyans to effectively govern themselves. Assistance must provide for establishing both the ability to govern and security during the transition from Qadhafi's regime to a democratic Libya. This should include:

- Means to vet and register personnel serving in the transitional authority,
- Resources for communications and public broadcasting, and
- Legal, financial management, judicial, and technical advisers.

These capabilities should be in place concomitant with any assistance provided by outside nations.

Second, before arms are provided to the opposition, these non-negotiable minimum criteria must be met:

- Forces must act under an established, competent, and responsible indigenous authority, acting in accordance with the status of lawful combatants compliant with the Geneva Conventions;
- Measures must be established to ensure transparency and accountability in the distribution and use of arms;
- Safeguards must be emplaced to prevent human rights abuses or the arming of terrorists;
- Assessments must be made to ensure that arms are appropriate (for example, since Qadhafi's air force has been grounded, opposition forces should not be supplied with surface-to-air weapons); and
- The training and logistical support necessary to make effective use of the arms must be considered.

Third, there should be an assessment of what roles are most appropriate for the U.S. to serve. U.S. assistance might be most effective in:

- Providing intelligence support,
- Offering logistical support for advisory efforts from the sea,
- Establishing “reach-back” technical assistance,
- Jamming the Qadhafi regime's television and radio propaganda outlets, and
- Empowering the opposition to broadcast its message of liberation to Libyans who remain under the regime's oppressive control.

America's Contribution: Leadership. Nations closest to the problem with the capacity to bring freedom, security, and stability to Libya and an interest in doing so should be encouraged to do as much as possible to accomplish these goals. Egypt, for example, could help arm, train, and supply the opposition's military forces. Other Arab League members, NATO allies, and European Union friends should be encouraged to provide financial backing for the intervention, if not military forces.

Nevertheless, a coherent, constructive assistance program will not happen without effective leadership. This is perhaps the most important contribution the U.S. can make. Certainly, the U.S. should

not simply outsource the real heavy lifting to the “international community.”

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10. Amtrak, *Monthly Performance Report for September 2010*, p. C1.