



Removing the Qaddafis Crunch time in Libya

The allies are sending out dangerous signs of confusion just when resolution is most needed

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ONLY five weeks after Western aircraft flew their first sorties over Libya, the fight has already become wearily familiar. The rebel advance and Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's claw back towards the east have been succeeded by what looks like stalemate. The outrage that united the world against the threat of butchery in Benghazi has begun to dull. The coalition's different interests have reasserted themselves.

The particular argument at the moment is about whether America will supply the special aircraft needed to attack the colonel's troops in urban areas (especially wretched Misrata where his men have been committing atrocities). Barack Obama has been stalling, the Europeans hyperventilating. The aircraft are desperately needed and losing Misrata would be a hefty blow (see [article](#)), but the worry is that the dithering is symptomatic both of a broader reluctance to see the job through and division over how it should be done. It is the moment in a campaign when, for the lack of application and clear thinking, the endeavour is in danger of slipping away. It is crunch time, when commitment counts.

The reckoning

Recall what is at stake in the deserts of north Africa. Non-interventionists on both sides of the Atlantic grumble that the West has "no dog in this fight". Cynics say that Arabs have never "done democracy" and ridicule the Libyan rebels as a hotch-potch of chancers with bogus claims to be democratic and some nasty jihadists in their midst. Behind it all lies the spectre of Western troops sinking into yet another quagmire, as they did in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where, people ask, is the timetable, the exit strategy or the definition of the mission? The partition of Libya is said to be probable. Mission creep is afoot.

Yet there is no reason why mission creep should turn Libya into a quagmire. Libya is emphatically not Iraq or Afghanistan. The effort against Colonel Qaddafi is tiny by comparison. Libya has no IEDs, no Green Zone, no American proconsul. There is not, will not and should not be an

invading force of ground troops. Libya is a different sort of operation.

The aims of intervening there are both humanitarian and idealistic but also political and pragmatic. And on all fronts, a lot more has been going right than wrong. For a start, thousands of lives have been saved, in Benghazi and elsewhere across the country, since the colonel has been prevented from unleashing his vengeance on those who sought, at first peacefully, to express their opposition to him. Misrata is a reminder of the horrors averted in eastern Libya.

The sceptics claim that this fight is no one else's business, but the entire world will be better off if a region of 350m Arabs that has been stuck in poverty and dysfunctional politics since the collapse of the Ottoman empire a century ago is given a chance to come alive. All too often, before the Arab spring, the choice was between a fatalistic torpor under authoritarian leaders such as Hosni Mubarak or the delusions of extremists such as al-Qaeda. Suddenly Arabs are being asked to shed the culture of victimhood, take responsibility for themselves and uncork the creativity of their young.

As for the racist assertion that Arabs cannot be democrats, nobody expects full-fledged democracies to appear instantly. The creation of better Arab governance will be a messy, uncertain process, but it is better than stagnation under vicious autocrats like Syria's Bashar Assad (see article). The momentum for this historic change is the other prize at stake in Libya. The mission will be accomplished when the Qaddafis are replaced by a more inclusive government, with UN oversight.

Such talk of regime change alarms many. The pacifist brigade complain that calls by Mr Obama and his British and French friends, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, to get rid of the colonel exceed the terms of the UN Security Council resolution. So, they add, do the bombs dropping on Tripoli.

Yet this venture is unarguably legal: the UN resolution endorses "all necessary measures", barring an occupying force, to protect civilians. That helpful elasticity plainly gives the intervening coalition the right to bomb military assets, such as tanks and artillery, that the colonel is using to fire indiscriminately at civilians. The resolution does not call for the colonel's removal but, as commander-in-chief of his forces, he has been responsible for crimes against humanity. A true peace, in which Libyans can freely express their opinion on the streets, cannot return for as long as he remains in power.

It's in America's interest too

The Libyan venture is still tilting towards success, but the fall of Misrata, a loss of collective Western nerve or a few military or diplomatic missteps could tip it the wrong way. And here Mr Obama is crucial.

That is not to deny that his allies could do more. It would be helpful if other Arabs, especially Egypt, joined Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan in supporting the rebels. Too many Europeans, such as Italy and Spain, have also been reticent — despite their insistence that European hard power still matters. In the past European air forces foolishly did not equip themselves with enough ground-attack aircraft of the sort that could now pulverise the colonel's hardware with precision in built-up areas. And they have compounded this weakness by failing to put enough fighter jets in the sky.

But it is Mr Obama's full weight behind the enterprise that has been most missed. Acutely aware of the mess caused by his predecessor in Iraq, he was right to take a back seat when the Arab upheavals began. Yet over Libya he has held back too much. No one wants the American cavalry to charge in on the ground and in war you can never guarantee the outcome you seek. But Mr Obama should not withhold American aircraft in the calculation that he can keep his hands clean. Alongside the Europeans and Arabs, he should send trainers, spotters, logistical and telecoms support to bolster the rebels, as the UN resolution allows him to do. No matter what the polls say back home, the American president is in this now; and voters will only applaud when he is successfully out of it. If ever there was a time for calculation to give way to resolution, it is now.

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