

Libya: the West's responsibility to protect

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ABC The Drum

4 April 2011

The imposition of the no-fly zone over Libya has illustrated the inability of Arab states to effectively deal with the dilemma that the UN-endorsed concept of responsibility to protect (R2P) presents.

Non-interference in the affairs of other Arab states has been the mantra often quoted but not always observed in recent years, but when sovereignty is considered a privilege and not a right as the concept of R2P dictates, the current political upheavals across the region have presented the Arab states with a dilemma that they have been reluctantly, and selectively, forced to address.

If ever there was a reason for presenting a united front amongst Arab states and vigorously upholding the ideals of R2P in the Arab world then Libya presented such a case. Gaddafi had few friends in the region given his penchant for lecturing his fellow leaders at various Arab summits, and there was no sectarian dimension to the conflict to distract possible participants. An alleged plot by Libya to assassinate then-crown prince Abdullah in 2003 had been forgiven but likely not forgotten and Lebanese-Libyan relations had been virtually non-existent since the disappearance of Lebanon's iconic Shia leader Musa Sadr during a visit to Tripoli in 1978.

Diplomatically there appeared to be good resolve. The Arab League's statement called on the "United Nations to shoulder its responsibility... to impose a no-fly zone over the movement of Libyan military planes and to create safe zones in the places vulnerable to air strikes". In the United Nations, UNSCR 1973 was tabled by Lebanon as the region's current member on the Security Council.

But once passed, there has been little by the way of practical support. Amr Moussa, the Arab League head and putative Egyptian presidential candidate complicated matters early by criticising allied actions amidst claims of civilian casualties, a claim he later withdrew. In the end only two Arab states, Qatar and the UAE out of the 21 members of the League (Libya having been kicked out) have contributed aircraft to the operation. And even UAE's contribution came after its foreign minister initially said that it would only be providing humanitarian aid. This after a former UAE air force chief claimed that the UAE had been prepared to send aircraft to the allied effort but changed its mind in response to the United States and Europe's lack of support for Gulf Arab intervention in Bahrain against the Shia protestors.

But for all their wealth and high-profile diplomatic activity they are hardly regional heavyweights and their contribution will do little to assuage feelings that when there is a real need to act, the Arab world considers that R2P applies to states other than their own. The Emir of Qatar noted as much when he criticised the Arab League for its weakness that has forced the international, rather than Arab community to act.

If R2P simply becomes a justification for western states to shoulder the burden of military action against regimes whose legitimacy has been lost because they are conducting security operations without regard to their civilian population, then R2P will only ever be seen as a means by which the West justifies military action. In the Arab world, intervention justified on the basis of R2P seemed a distant concept when the West valued stability more than it did political pluralism. But now that popular revolts are spreading across the Arab world, the reluctance to attack other regimes even when justified under R2P shows that the concept of humanitarian intervention still leaves most of the Arab world thinking it's someone else's problem.

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