

The Strategy Behind Operation Ellamy

Written by Anthony Glees

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ANTHONY GLEES, APR 1 2011

On 17 March 2011, Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan dictator, went on radio and TV to warn the people of Benghazi, who were rising against his murderous rule, that his troops were about to enter the city. They would 'search every house' and 'show no mercy or pity' to those who wanted him gone.[1] Their fate was not in any doubt. 'It's over' he said 'We are coming tonight. Prepare yourselves...we will find you even in your closets'. These awful threats were the spur to UN Resolution 1973, which passed later that day, and to NATO's armed intervention in order to prevent the further slaughter of Libyans who mostly wanted just more democracy.

Gaddafi has long had form as a murderer. Neither Britain nor America have forgotten his role in the 1988 Lockerbie bombing which killed 270 people. Within Libya, the collective memory of the massacre of 1200 Benghazi protestors in the Abu Saleem gaol in June 1996 will have been strong along with the hanging in Benghazi of the dissident Sadak Shwedi in front of 6000 school children in 1984.[2]

More or less from the start, the UK government (and David Cameron in particular) made the case for intervention against Gaddafi. Indeed, words were backed with hard action. On the weekend of 5-6 March MI6 officers, protected by the Special Air Squadron, flew to Libya to establish a mission to the rebels in Benghazi. Poor planning and inadequate equipment combined with the rebels' misguided view that they did not need outside assistance turned a brave and proper first step into a temporary fiasco (the mission has now been re-established).

Cameron's robust line had been in evidence a month earlier in his Munich speech of 5 February 2011.[3] He had promised that Britain would not retreat from its 'activist role in the world', saying that 'what matters is the political will to build the military capability we need as nations and allies to deliver in the field'. Turning to the revolt in Arab North Africa, and the 'hundreds and thousands of people demanding the universal right to free elections and democracy in Tunis and Cairo' the prime minister said it was an 'example of how western values and Islam can be entirely compatible', drawing a key link between western support for the dissidents and the upholding core western values.

Cameron had already castigated Blair's government for pressing for the release of Abdelbasset al-Megraghi, the convicted Lockerbie bomber.[4] His insistence that the world could not stand by and watch Gaddafi massacre dissidents preceded president Obama's statement to this effect by a fortnight.[5] Cameron's resolute stance (shared with Nicolas Sarkozy) was also a contrast with Obama's obvious reluctance to get involved and the US president's initial and feeble insistence that Arab dissidents should have ownership of their own revolts.[6] Equally feeble were the abstentions at the UN Security Council, most notably Germany's whose lack of leadership (designed to prevent electoral defeat on 27 March) achieved precisely this whilst also undermining its bid for a permanent seat on the Council. Russia also abstained (in January 2010 it had sold arms worth \$1.8bn to Gaddafi).

Resolution 1973 authorised armed intervention to protect civilian life from Gaddafi's forces and almost at once a massive barrage of over 100 Cruise missiles was fired at various strategic sites inside Libya. Although the Americans had initially taken the lead, as analysts knew they would, increasingly NATO presented itself as the director of the action (doubtless to allow Obama to say this was not an American war against an Arab ruler).

However, two things were plain from the start. First, since it was Gaddafi who attempting to destroy the rebel forces, the only certain means of preventing this would involve either his own destruction, or his capture and delivery to the

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International Criminal Court. One is inclined to recall Gladstone's famous words of 1876 (attacking Disraeli's indifference to massacres carried out by Turks) pointing out that it was only by their removal 'one and all, bag and baggage' that the killing would be stopped.[7] Giving Gaddafi safe passage to a state which felt comfortable harbouring a terrorist would simply allow him to plan new acts of terrorism against the West. Second, TV pictures made it plain that the rebels lacked the firepower to destroy Gaddafi's hold on power making it necessary for them to receive arms at once, whether from the USA, the UK or France. Whilst Resolution 1973 did not specifically permit this, it did not specifically forbid it either. Few doubted that arms would find their way to the rebels or indeed that this is already happening.

To some, intervention only eight years after the Iraq war and whilst the conflict in Afghanistan still raged seemed dangerous folly. Ex-diplomats like Sir Oliver Miles and Sir Jeremy Greenstock did the rounds to say the West should stay out of this conflict altogether along the lines of Chamberlain's comment on the Czechs in 1938 ('a quarrel in a far-away country, of whose people we know nothing').[8] The influential Guardian journalist, Seumas Milne, wrote 'Western military action risks spreading the conflict and undermining the democratic movement' and said a rebel leader had insisted 'the US should take care of its own people for we can look after ourselves'.[9]

Many people agreed with this line: some 70% of Britons feared the conflict might become another Iraq with a (small) majority preferring to stay out of it.[10] Voices were heard saying that since Britain had done deals with Gaddafi in the past, it was hardly ethical to turn on him now. In fact, it was not wrong for a government to try to bring Gaddafi to international lawfulness although the policy was a dismal failure. If ethical values had been undermined it was by those publicly unaccountable British institutions (in particular the LSE and other UK universities) who had happily prostituted themselves in a squalid scramble for Libyan oil cash.

Why then did Cameron's government, along with France and the USA, decide to intervene? Was Iraq far less of a lesson than many had thought? Or was the lesson of Iraq rather different from what many assumed? The real strategy behind Operation Ellamy has little to do with perceived errors, day to day opinions or even differences between political parties but with the far deeper structural imperatives that drive British and much of western foreign policy and have done so repeatedly since 1945.

How states deal with each other and with the external and internal threats that confront them has developed and changed over time. Everyone knows about the Westphalian settlement of 1648 which established the concept of national sovereignty (and the principle that one state should not interfere in the internal affairs of any other state). Similarly everyone understands that by 1939 it was clear these ideas had outlived their usefulness. Even so it took the Second World War, the genocide of the Jews and Gypsies and the mass murder of Russians, Poles and many others to move informed public opinion (as articulated in the UN Charter on Human Rights of 1948 and the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague in 2002) towards acceptance that states and their rulers should not be allowed to do what they will with their subjects and that if they do so, the world's great liberal democracies can be entitled under international law to intervene in their 'internal affairs'. Of course, the progress towards the justification of intervention has been uneven: the civilised world stood by whilst 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda were murdered in 1994 and thousands of Muslims were massacred in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia before NATO's armed attack on Milosevic's regime in March 1999.

Seeing Gaddafi's violation of his own people, Britain was right to see it had no safe option other than intervention. Indeed our own security as a western state demanded it. Western democracies are sustained by their belief in human rights, democratic institutions and the rule of law. To suggest to Arabs demanding these very things that they must accept slaughter or torture for doing so would not destroy the credibility and concept of liberal democracy in the Islamic world but would at stroke promote the fortunes and doctrine of Islamist extremists and Al-Qaeda.

To those who argue that Al-Qaeda had infiltrated the rebels (as it will doubtless have done) the answer is that the risk of pushing decent dissidents into the hands of Islamists by our turning our back on them is far greater than accepting and then managing the fact that some AQ leaders will be part of the rebellion. This is yet another reason for our arming the rebels whilst counselling them, strongly, that Islamists will rob them of their rights as surely as the Gaddafis and Mubaraks of this world.

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With intervention, the West sends a clear message to all Arabs and those who rule over them whether despots or occupying states. Israel, for example, should understand that sooner or later Palestinians will want independent government over the lands that it occupied after 1967 and that suppression of their political will and dignity will never deliver peace. Dignity is indivisible and must be afforded to the Arabs no less than to the Jews.

The dynamics of western power, as they have evolved since 1945, prescribe a fundamental continuity which a British government can ignore only by initiating a fundamental change of direction and the massive re-thinking of its entire strategic interests which are part of it. To have armed strength and not use it to help protect, from certain death, innocent civilians and dissidents wanting western rights would inevitably lead to the wholesale dismantling of our military forces and a retreat into impotent neutrality. It would also mean our vast investment in intelligence gathering, indeed the very idea of underwriting our global economic interests would have to be set aside. Of course there are risks here. But life is risky. To stand with those who want democracy can only ever be the right thing to do. As Tony Blair has said, the case for western intervention is as strong now as it has ever been.[11]

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[1] <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/17/141999.html>

[2] James Hider in *The Times* 18 March 2011

[3] <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference-60293>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8212457.stm>

[5] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12680280>

[6] <http://nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/with-libya-obama-expands-his-own-doctrine-20110303?print=true>

[7] W E Gladstone 'Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East', 1876.

[8] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/mwh/ir1/chamberlainandappeasementrev8.shtml>

[9] *The Guardian* 2 March 2011

[10] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-29/u-k-public-skeptical-about-libya-action-comres-poll-indicates.html>

[11] <http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/speeches/entry/tony-blair-speech-to-chicago-council-on-global-affairs/>