

The “Arab Spring” and External Military Intervention

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By early 2010, the entanglement of the US and its Western allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, most notably the costs incurred and the questionable achievements of the military involvement, suggested that the era of Western military intervention in Arab and Muslim countries had come to an end. Western countries sought to disengage from their existing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan as soon as possible, and public opinion strongly opposed any new intervention. However, the upheaval in the Arab world that began in late 2010 (the so-called “Arab Spring”) affected this trend, and restored the question of external Western military involvement in the region to the international agenda.

In the context of the “Arab Spring,” the issue has generally arisen when an uprising against an existing dictatorial regime encounters military force by the regime to suppress the protest. In the next stage, the conflict escalates into a prolonged civil war between the various elements of the population. This development is characteristic mainly of societies divided along religious, ethnic, or tribal lines, or some combination thereof. In these cases, the military units still loyal to the regime join the sectors supporting the regime to fight against the opposition to the regime. Such a civil war is by nature especially ugly, as the rules of international law governing armed combat are not observed and the civilian population becomes a principal target of the warring parties. There is also a risk that the conflict will spill over into neighboring countries and jeopardize the interests of external players. In these cases, external military intervention, either by regional

parties or extra-regional actors, becomes necessary in order to halt the civil war and the attendant horrors. In cases where the conflict is decided quickly, whether the regime is successful in suppressing the uprising by force or whether the rebellion succeeds and the regime falls fairly quickly (Tunisia and Egypt), the question does not arise.

Since the “Arab Spring” began, there have been two completely different cases of direct external military intervention in the Middle East: in Libya, on behalf of the rebels, and in Bahrain, on behalf of the regime. At this stage, it appears that the goals of the respective interventions were achieved. Since then, pressure has risen for similar intervention to end the civil war in Syria, and has taken the initial form of indirect external military involvement through aid to both sides. Another theater in which demands for military intervention may surface is Yemen, where stability has thus far proved elusive since Ali Abdullah Saleh was ousted as President and where the crisis may further deteriorate.

Two types of considerations can cause external parties to contemplate military intervention. The first involves humanitarian considerations, with the drive to prevent atrocities and harm to innocent civilians. These considerations wield much influence among public opinion. The second type consists of strategic considerations by the parties contemplating intervention. Both sets of considerations, however, are always weighed against the cost of action for the intervening parties and the likelihood of realization of the goals of the intervention.

Humanitarian Considerations

Along with the establishment of the United Nations following the acts of genocide of World War II, the field of international law dealing with norms that sought to limit the harm to civilian populations in wartime evolved and expanded. Interest in this area grew further after the end of the Cold War, and the increased number of intra-state conflicts brought the clash between two norms – sovereignty versus humanitarian intervention – to the fore of the global agenda. In this framework, “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) was formulated.

R2P is a UN initiative premised on a set of principles that hold that sovereignty is not merely a right but also a responsibility. The initiative,

which was accepted as a norm of behavior, focuses on preventing four types of crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. It includes three basic principles:

- a. A country has a responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities.
- b. The international community has a responsibility to assist a country in fulfilling this principal responsibility.
- c. If a country fails to protect its citizens from mass atrocities, and peaceful means of forcing it to do so are unsuccessful, the international community has a responsibility to intervene forcefully. Means of doing this include economic sanctions, with military force as a last resort. The method by which the international community decides on military intervention is usually through a decision by the UN Security Council, based on Article 7 of the UN Charter, which authorizes military force for the purpose of preventing aggression and acts against peace.

These principles were included in a summary document of a global summit convened by the UN in 2005 to discuss the prevention of mass atrocities. The summit was the culmination of work by an international committee on intervention and national sovereignty established by Canada in 2000, following a call by then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to formulate an agreement on the right to intervene for humanitarian purposes. This committee formulated the “right to protect” terminology, and these principles appeared already in the concluding report published in December 2001.¹ In 2006 the United Nations Security Council ratified the main articles of the committee’s summary report, and as such made the R2P norm binding on member states.

With the approval of these principles, the key question is under what circumstances the use of force is justified on behalf of the right to protect. The report of the 2001 international committee proposed the following six essential criteria for justifying military intervention:²

- a. Just cause
- b. Right intention
- c. Last resort
- d. Legitimate authority
- e. Proportional means

f. Reasonable prospect (of success for achieving the goal)

Within international forums there is still no agreement about these criteria, and even if there were, there is much room for interpretation. In any case, in recent decades and until the beginning of the “Arab Spring,” the only case of military intervention in the Middle East that could be characterized as humanitarian (even if it was joined by other considerations) was the decision to enforce no-fly zones in Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. These zones were established by the US, the UK, and France, which asserted that they were authorized under UN Security Council Resolution 688, even though the resolution did not specifically mention this type of activity.

The Regional Strategic System

In many cases countries decide to intervene militarily in internal conflicts in other countries when it seems to them that this will serve their strategic interests. Like other regions around the world, the Middle East has seen many examples of this. For example, throughout its history Lebanon has been a battlefield for foreign countries and sub-state actors who used the country’s ethnic structure and conflicts between the various communities to promote their own strategic interests vis-à-vis their strategic rivals.

When the events of the “Arab Spring” began in late 2010, the main strategic conflict in the Middle East was waged between two axes. Led by Iran, “the resistance axis” included states and sub-state actors – among them Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas – actively opposed to the West and Israel. Countering this bloc was the “axis of moderate or pragmatic states” in the Arab world, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia and including most of the Arab states. This axis was supported by the US and the West, and it had shared interests and a tacit understanding with Israel, even if Israel’s political situation vis-à-vis the Arab states did not permit open Israeli membership in the axis.

The prevailing opinion in the Arab world was that the resistance axis was in ascent and its opponents were in decline. The weakening of America’s status in the Middle East as a result of its entanglement in Iraq and Afghanistan; its military withdrawal from these countries; and the perceived achievements of the resistance movements (e.g. Hizbollah and

Hamas) against Israel and other elements of the moderate axis, reflected in Israel’s unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, the Hamas takeover in Gaza, and Hizbollah’s achievements in the Second Lebanon War, contributed to this opinion. All these events strengthened the status and influence of Iran and its allies in the Arab world and boosted their popularity among Arabs, even in the moderate Sunni countries.

The insurrections against Arab regimes erupted for reasons that have nothing to do with competition between the two axes. Within a short time, however, the various parties in the regional struggle attempted to prevent a weakening of their positions by the ensuing regime changes, and if possible to benefit from these changes. As a result, the “Arab Spring,” which initially seemed unconnected to the regional competition, aggravated it and gave this contest a new dimension.

In the first stage, with the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt – both members of the moderate axis tied to the West – the resistance actors believed that these developments were to their benefit, spelling a weakened moderate axis and a stronger resistance axis. They particularly rejoiced at the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak, whom they deemed a bitter enemy, and the subsequent strengthening of the Islamic political movements after the fall of these regimes also appeared to serve their interests. In tandem, the moderate axis states sought to prevent their own weakening by strengthening likeminded elements in countries where the regimes had fallen or were about to fall. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, played a key role in providing aid, mainly financial, to the political elements close to them, which paradoxically were in many cases the same Islamic political movements whose rise had been so welcomed by Iran. This intervention took its most extreme expression in the military intervention by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies in Bahrain on behalf of the regime, which helped suppress the insurrection by the Shiite majority.

As a result of the increased hostility between the two camps with the evens of the “Arab Spring,” the Arab world increasingly perceived the conflict between the axes as a religious conflict between Sunnis and Shiites – to the dismay of Iran, which consistently sought to gloss over this aspect of its rivalry with other forces in the Middle East. The developments in Bahrain, for example, played a key role in strengthening this Arab

perspective. The Arab Gulf countries, headed by Saudi Arabia, regarded the protests in Bahrain as a deliberate attempt by Iran to bring down the Sunni regime and replace it with a regime of the Shiite majority that would be subject to Iran's influence.

Another development regarding potential external intervention in countries embroiled in an internal crisis as a result of the "Arab Spring" was the escalating competition between Turkey and Iran. Before the "Arab Spring," Turkey embraced a "zero problems with neighbors" policy and took measures to improve its relations with resistance states Syria and Iran – notwithstanding Turkey's relations with the West, its membership in NATO, and its identity as a Sunni country. The "Arab Spring" forced Turkey to choose its allegiance, leading it to side with the camp that while essentially supporting the popular Arab rising against the dictatorial regimes, sought to deny Iran any achievements derived from the uprising. This rivalry between these two non-Arab regional powers for influence in the Arab world had existed previously, but it now rose to the surface.

One country playing a role disproportionate to its size is Qatar. In contrast to the past, when it tried to juggle between the two axes, it also positioned itself clearly in the camp opposing Iran. It demonstrated its willingness to actively intervene, including militarily, on the side of elements that it supports in the internal struggles within Arab countries. Its wealth, as well as ownership of the influential al-Jazeera television station, gives it the means for such intervention.

All these developments have created a mosaic of strategic considerations on the part of the various actors linked to potential military intervention in internal crises related to the upheavals of the "Arab Spring."

The Strategic System outside the Region

The key extra-regional players in potential military intervention in Arab countries are the permanent members of the UN Security Council, mainly because of their ability to grant or withhold legitimacy from external involvement in conflicts, resulting from their veto power in the Security Council. In addition, the US and NATO share a key role as actors willing and able to play an active role in military interventions. However, the events of the "Arab Spring" have questioned the leading status of the US

in interventions of this type. The American public is still recovering from the trauma of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and therefore the US is not eager to assume the main role in military intervention in the Middle East. Within the administration itself, this lack of enthusiasm is fed by doubts concerning the prospective results of military intervention on behalf of the rebels, when the nature of the main players within the opposition forces is not sufficiently clear. These doubts were reinforced following the assassination of the US ambassador to Libya during his visit in Benghazi in September 2012 by a local militia. The US is mindful that its successful support of the mujahidin in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s set the stage for the evolution of the local extremist Islamic elements into jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. These groups have since made the US – and the West in general – the main targets of their attacks.

The solution devised by the US administration to resolve the tension between these reservations and the pressures to embark on military involvement, motivated mainly by humanitarian considerations, is the development of the concept reflected in the international military intervention in Libya, namely, “leading from behind.” According to this concept, the US will not stand at the forefront of military intervention, and will refrain wherever possible from using its forces directly in the fighting. It will, however, assist in leading international military intervention and supplying an aid package composed of logistical means, electronic warfare, and air refueling capacity. In special cases, when the US possesses aerial warfare capabilities that its ally lacks, such as a capability to suppress the aerial defenses of the country in which the military intervention is underway, the US will also use direct attack means early in the air battle in order to pave the way for its European and Arab allies undertaking the principal attack effort. This direct attack involvement by the US will be of limited scope and duration.

An important element of the US and general Western concept is strong opposition to “boots on the ground” as part of these interventions, in order to prevent entanglements such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. This prompts the question whether it is possible to win campaigns of this sort solely with airpower, without the use of ground troops. Those supporting

this concept point to Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime was defeated by local forces with the help of US and allied airpower, and the example of Iraq, where the campaign was ostensibly decided by airpower, with the ground forces providing only the finishing touch. Those who challenge this concept counter that toppling a regime with airpower with the help of local forces is only the first – and not decisive stage – in the campaign. In the second stage, it frequently becomes clear that in order to prevent chaos and maintain the initial achievements, “boots on the ground” are necessary, exactly as was proven by the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is premature to decide whether the idea of using airpower alone with the US “leading from behind” will be the main format for international intervention resulting from the “Arab Spring.” Additional support for this approach can be found from the experience accumulated in the Arab-Israeli theater in recent years, where there were several cases in which it was necessary to use international military and other security forces to manage problems between Israel and its neighbors. In all of these cases, the US led from behind, even if it did not use the term. Following Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, for example, the US led an international effort that resulted in an agreement to place an international inspection element, EUBAM, at the Rafiah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. The actual inspection was performed by the European Union. A second example is the case of the US Security Coordinator (USSCO) with the Palestinian Authority. In this case, the command is American; the military personnel doing the actual work with the Palestinian security apparatus are British and Canadian. A third example is the new international force positioned in southern Lebanon, UNFIL 2, following the Second Lebanon War. The US led the initiative, but European forces do most of the actual work.

Humanitarian considerations and the desire to prevent mass atrocities play a key role in pressure from the international community to decide on international military intervention in countries like Libya and Syria, but strategic considerations are also involved. One such consideration is an assessment of whether the regime is expected to fall in any event. In that case it is assumed that military intervention on the side of the rebels will ensure good relations with the new regime for the countries involved,

especially the powerful ones, and either retain it or bring it into their sphere of influence. In cases in which a country is in the sphere of influence of an enemy country, or the country’s regime is hostile to the West, the possibility of changing the strategic balance by overthrowing the hostile regime may be an important factor in the decision whether to intervene. During the US presidential election campaign, the Republicans attacked President Obama for refraining from military intervention in Syria. The reason was not that the basic philosophy of the Republican Party gives greater weight to humanitarian considerations in US foreign policy; on the contrary, historically the Democrats were the party that supported military intervention for humanitarian reasons. The Republicans were seeking to bring down a regime that they considered hostile, and to weaken the axis led by Iran.

The same reasons apply to countries seeking to prevent international military intervention, i.e., the desire to prevent the overthrow of friendly regimes, or to avoid bolstering the status of powerful rival countries through regime changes. Russia and China consistently strive to prevent international military intervention in order to obstruct any strengthening of US status and a corresponding deterioration in their own position. Another consideration, shared by many Third World countries, is opposition in principle to foreign involvement in internal conflicts, because these countries are mostly non-democratic and are concerned about precedents that could lead to pressure toward international military involvement within their own territory.

The principal weapon employed by countries in their attempts to thwart initiatives for international intervention is depriving such intervention of international legitimacy. In the approach accepted by international law, only resolutions by the UN Security Council, or in special cases in the UN General Assembly according to the principle “Uniting for Peace,” can confer legitimacy on international military intervention. Russia and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council, and therefore have the ability to prevent such Security Council resolutions by exercising their veto power.

In such cases, the countries supporting international intervention can bypass the Security Council by acting in a framework called a “Coalition

of the Willing.” One of the first examples of this bypass was the stationing of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai as a part of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. The peace treaty itself stipulated that a UN force would be stationed in Sinai, but the Security Council refused to pass such a resolution, and a Coalition of the Willing therefore provided the force. This was a simple and relatively easy case, because the force was founded in a situation in which it had been agreed to end the conflict and its stationing was acceptable to both sides. In situations arising as part of the “Arab Spring,” the situation is more complex, because an ongoing conflict is involved and the application of force is against the will of the regime in power. In such situations, therefore, the absence of international legitimacy constitutes a more difficult problem, and a decision to act in the framework of a Coalition of the Willing is therefore more difficult to attain.

Bahrain

The military intervention in Bahrain differs from other cases in the context of the “Arab Spring.” First, it was an intervention on the side of the regime, and second, only countries within the Persian Gulf sub-region took part in it. As in the other Arab countries, the uprising in Bahrain began as a popular non-violent protest against the autocratic monarchy. However, given that in Bahrain a Sunni royal house rules over a country with a Shiite majority, the uprising initially appeared to be a rebellion of the Shiite majority against a minority Sunni regime in the Persian Gulf – an area already fraught with tension between Shiite Iran, a regional power with expansionist ambitions, and the Sunni Persian Gulf countries defending themselves against these ambitions. Justifiably or not, Iran has been accused of inciting the Shiite majority to rebel and giving material assistance to the rebellion. Saudi Arabia, which stands at the forefront of the conflict with Iran, is very concerned that the unrest will also infect the Shiite minority in its eastern provinces. On March 15, 2012 Saudi Arabia sent military forces to Bahrain, joined by token forces from other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, to help the regime suppress the uprising by force.³ This scenario is unique to the Gulf region, and it is doubtful whether similar developments in other regions of the Arab world will follow. In the Persian Gulf itself, this Saudi Arabian intervention

followed Saudi military intervention against the Houthi rebels in Yemen even before the “Arab Spring,” and therefore reflects a consistent policy from Riyadh.

Libya

The uprising in Libya began in February 2011, in the wake of the successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. By early March, the regime had already lost control of various areas, especially in the Cyrenaica region in eastern Libya. Desertion of entire Libyan military units helped the rebels. The forces of Muammar Qaddafi repulsed the rebel attack in western Libya, however, and began a successful counterattack along the Mediterranean coast in the direction of Benghazi, the largest city in eastern Libya and the rebel center. The behavior of the regime’s forces toward the civilian population in rebel cities and threats voiced by Qaddafi and his associates strengthened concern that a conquest of Benghazi by the regime’s forces would lead to a massacre of the city’s population. The US, followed by Australia and Canada, imposed sanctions against Libya in what proved to be a futile attempt to exert pressure on the regime. A Security Council resolution to authorize the International Court of Justice to investigate the regime’s deeds also had no effect. On March 17, 2011, the Security Council passed Resolution 1973 ordering the establishment of no-fly zones and the adoption of all means necessary to defend civilians.

The resolution was enforced by NATO by a Coalition of the Willing that included several NATO countries, mainly France and the UK, along with warplanes from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In the initial stage, the US also participated by launching Tomahawk missiles to destroy the Libyan air defense system, but later confined its role to providing aid to its European allies, who carried out the actual attack. Germany was prominent among the NATO countries that chose not to participate. The aerial attacks enabled the rebel army to overcome Qaddafi’s forces, gaining control of Tripoli, the capital city, on August 16, 2011. This essentially decided the revolt, although fighting continued until October, when the rebels gained full control of Libya.

Russia and China were dissatisfied with the developments in Libya, and opposed intervention there for many of the reasons that generally inform

their opposition to intervention initiatives. They were the main parties who suffered from the fall of the regime, which deprived them of the ability to follow up on promising economic deals with Libya. They felt cheated by the West because they consented to Security Council Resolution 1973, which had provided a mandate for limited action designed to protect civilians. NATO interpreted this resolution broadly and began a major aerial offensive aimed at overthrowing the regime.

Those in the West who opposed military intervention expressed concern that the West was aiding rebels whose identity and goals were unknown, and there was particular concern about Islamic and jihadist elements among the rebels. There was also concern about a chaotic situation following the regime's fall, given the tribal character of Libyan society. These fears largely proved exaggerated. Even though the transition to a democratic regime is not complete and many problems remain, particularly the failure to disarm the militias (leading to the assassination of the US ambassador to Libya), the situation in Libya is relatively stable, the oil industry has resumed full activity, and free elections have been held, which were not won by the Islamic parties. These developments are important, because Western concern about intervention elsewhere is due in part to anxiety that external military intervention could cause extreme instability and unanticipated negative results. Many of these fears proved unfounded in Libya.

Syria

As of late 2012, the issue of military intervention continued to figure on the international agenda, this time regarding Syria. Local protests against the Syrian regime and demands for reform began on March 15, 2011, and in the course of 2012 turned into a full scale civil war. This civil war, which has featured mass atrocities by the regime as well as by some opposition elements, threatens to grow even uglier due to the ethnic composition of Syrian society, which has converted the struggle against the regime into a struggle between different communities. While an effort was made early in the uprising to portray the insurrection as a civilian uprising encompassing all the communal groups, the insurrection has since become a violent conflict between armed Sunni groups and the regime. The regime's use

of Alawite militias, "Shabbiha," to suppress protests has to a large extent contributed to the ethnic character of the civil war. The Sunni opposition is fighting against minorities who support the regime, especially the Alawites and Christians. The result is a sharp increase in civilian victims of atrocities among both sides, and a large increase in the number of refugees fleeing to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.

There are several reasons why the conflict may well continue for a while, with the regime not being overthrown soon, if at all. The ethnic nature of the conflict helps the regime because it compels the minorities to support it, even if some minorities object to the regime's corruption and dictatorial nature. They fear the consequences of a ruling Sunni majority, and realize that if the regime falls, they will fall with it. The loyalty of the regime's armed forces has strengthened for the same reason. The security forces and the military, the basis of the regime's power, are run mostly by the minorities, who recognize that they would fall together with the regime and face massive acts of revenge. While desertion by Sunni soldiers at various levels has affected the Syrian army's operational capacity, there are no signs that it has had a significant effect on those engaged in repressing of the uprising.

Another factor delaying a decision of the civil war is external intervention. There has been no direct military involvement, but external involvement in the form of aid to the two sides has increased over the past year. The escalation in the struggle between the resistance axis and its rivals in the Arab world has highlighted Syria's position as a key country in this contest. Opponents of the resistance axis, headed by the Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, regard the uprising as a golden opportunity to weaken the Iranian-led axis, and are therefore supporting the rebels with money, weapons, training, and command posts. Turkey too has played an important role in this assistance, although it has preferred to portray its support for the insurgents as opposition in principle to an oppressive regime, rather than opposition to Iran. In any case, it has offered shelter to armed insurgents and their commanders, and has facilitated a flow of aid to them, easily undertaken given the long and porous border between the two countries. The rebels, who are aware of the importance of

their territorial connection with the Turkish rear, have lent priority to the conquest of areas along the border.

The third element in favor of the insurgents is the jihadi-Salafi movements in the neighboring countries, particularly Iraq. These movements have sent personnel and weapons to fight against the “Alawite heretics,” and to influence the nature of the state that would emerge after the fall of the regime. A fourth element is represented by Western countries, headed by the US. These countries are still ambivalent about supporting the armed opposition, which is largely perceived as an ill-defined entity; potentially problematic elements might inadvertently be bolstered, as occurred in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, aid on a limited scale has begun, principally in the form of the supply of auxiliary equipment, communications equipment, and other such supplies.

On the other side, the two main partners on the resistance axis, Iran and Hizbollah, who well realize the negative consequences for them should the Assad regime fall, are trying to help the regime to the best of their ability. Various reports on actual participation in the fighting by Iran (from the al-Quds force) and Hizbollah are still unconfirmed. Verification is difficult, because both sides are disseminating much disinformation. There is no doubt, however, that they have assisted the regime with equipment for suppressing uprisings, intelligence tools aimed at improving control in the internal theater (including on social networks), advice, and training. One of the regime’s weak points is its deteriorating economic situation, which restricts its available resources. Iran is also aiding the regime in this aspect by enabling it to evade the economic sanctions imposed on Syria, as well as most likely providing it with direct financial aid.

The external aid given to both sides has created a stalemate, in which the insurgent forces are capable of taking control of towns and regions, especially those further from the center, and occasionally dealing painful blows to the regime even in the heartland areas. One dramatic example of this capability was the attack in which a large proportion of the regime’s security leadership was eliminated. On the other hand, the army loyal to Assad is capable of operating wherever it decides and of defeating the insurgents in a direct battle. The blanket is too small, however; the army cannot be everywhere at once. The rebels have repeatedly exploited this

fact in places where they were defeated, once the army units leave the scene for other battlegrounds. The regime is careful at all times to maintain control of the main axis, i.e., Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, the roads connecting them, and the coastal regions. This situation, along with the killing of civilians, could continue for some time. The prolonging of the situation also generates possibilities of instability spreading to neighboring countries; there are already signs of this in Lebanon and Jordan.

The situation in Syria typifies a situation requiring intervention under the Responsibility to Protect norm, and is the main factor putting pressure on the Western countries to intervene militarily. Various degrees of involvement are under discussion. One is the establishment of a safe zone in Syrian territory near the Turkish border where refugees can find a safe haven. Another level involves no-fly zones to prevent the regime from using airpower against civilians. A third possibility is the use of airpower to provide the insurgents with offensive aid against Assad's forces. The possibility of sending ground forces into Syria is almost never mentioned.

It appears that in contrast to the intervention in Libya, no decision has been made yet in favor of direct military intervention in the fighting in Syria, for the following reasons:

- a. There is no chance of obtaining international legitimacy for such action, i.e., a Security Council resolution, due to opposition by Russia and China. These countries feel that the West deceived them concerning the international intervention in Libya, and they are determined to prevent a similar occurrence in Syria. Russia and China's special interest in Syria, their sole foothold in the Arab world, only reinforces this determination.
- b. The Syrian opposition is divided and diffused, and contains jihadist elements. The international efforts and pressure to unite the opposition have been unsuccessful so far. This fact, as well as the ethnic character of Syrian society, strengthens concerns among the Western countries that overthrowing the regime would lead to chaos and a war of all against all. Such a situation would force the West to send ground forces to Syria in order to separate the combatants and prevent atrocities. This would be liable cause for a prolonged entanglement in Syria, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- c. Turkey, a key country in any form of external military intervention in Syria, objects at this stage to such intervention. Turkey also fears entanglement, and does not wish to aggravate its conflict with Iran.
- d. There is concern that any military operation would be more complicated and involve losses, due to the Syrian air defense capability, which is more advanced than Libya's, although the rebels have scored some tangible achievements in eroding the Syrian air defense system.
- e. Finally, there is concern that the conflict could spread outside Syria on a larger scale.

As a result of the inability to pass a suitable Security Council resolution, it seems that military intervention is possible only if a Coalition of Willing NATO countries makes a decision to intervene. The US would be a key player in such a decision, because without participation by the US, other countries lack the ability to conduct a sustained air campaign in a country with a developed air defense system. This is a difficult scenario but cannot be ruled out, because the expected development of a civil war, accompanied by more civilian massacres and refugees, will gradually increase international pressure for military intervention. Turkey, a key player, might also change its attitude out of concern that a prolonged crisis could result in the creation of a Kurdish mini-state in northeastern Syria and provide the PKK, the Kurdish insurgent organization fighting in Turkey, with another base for operations against Turkey. Another factor that could lead the international community to intervene in Syria is anxiety that Syria's large arsenal of chemical weapons could fall into the irresponsible hands of jihadist groups or Hizbollah.

Strategic considerations, i.e., the possibility of overthrowing a hostile regime and weakening the axis led by Iran, will likely form some part of the considerations of the US and other countries. It does not appear, however, that these considerations will prove decisive where direct military intervention by the West is concerned. NATO countries will be the main factor in any such intervention, but several Arab countries, especially from the Persian Gulf, are also likely to take part.

Conclusion

Developments regarding the question of external military intervention since the “Arab Spring” began indicate that Western public opinion still opposes further military intervention in the Middle East, particularly the involvement of ground forces. Nevertheless, difficult humanitarian crises following insurgencies in Arab countries are generating pressure likely to cause intervention in certain circumstances. The probability of intervention increases when the humanitarian crisis is accompanied by strategic consideration that support intervention, and when the level of risk is perceived as reasonable. This was the case in Libya, but is still not the case in Syria.

International legitimacy is an important element, but circumstances could arise in which the intervening partners would accept partial legitimacy in the framework of a Coalition of the Willing. NATO and the European countries are playing an increasing role in initiating and carrying out intervention, yet their limited military capabilities mean that participation by the US, even if only partial, is virtually essential. For its part, the US prefers to remain in the rear and engage in leading from behind, without any frontal involvement.

It is highly possible that the upheavals in the Arab world will continue to create scenarios in which external military intervention is a necessary element for preventing chaos or cruel oppression that would harm the civilian population on a large scale.

Notes

- 1 “2005 World Summit Outcome,” http://globalr2p.org/media/pdf/WSOD_2005.pdf.
- 2 “The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty,” December 2001, http://globalr2p.org/media/pdf/ICISS_R2P.pdf.
- 3 Yoel Guzansky, “Saudi Activism in a Changing Middle East,” *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 3 (2011): 57-69.