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Europe's Leaders Fear Libya Could Become Next Afghanistan

The West's Nightmare

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The Europeans and Americans would like to help the rebels in Libya, but the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan have spurred fears of a military intervention. So far, the only thing the EU has been able to agree on are financial sanctions. In Germany, leaders fear getting sucked in to the civil war. By SPIEGEL Staff

There are times when some politicians and diplomats in Europe and the United States wish that someone would die. They wish that a head of state or government would give the order to dispatch a number of aircraft or launch a few missiles. They don't speak openly of this, of course, but they do say these things under their breath. "Why doesn't somebody just shoot him?" they ask. Usually, this hope is directed by Europe toward America.

This is again such a time. A number of politicians and diplomats are quietly hoping that they will hear one morning on the radio that Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi has died during the night. According to this scenario, the news bulletin will then inform listeners that an American bomber squadron has safely returned to its aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean.

The current situation calls to mind former US President Ronald Reagan. He tried to eliminate Gadhafi back in April 1986. At the time, Reagan ordered 36 laser-guided bombs to be dropped on the Bab al-Azizija military compound, Gadhafi's command center in the suburbs of Tripoli. Gadhafi survived. Reagan was derided for the failed mission and sharply criticized for the attempt. Some Western countries view such actions as murder -- and thus unacceptable.

When it comes to war and the West, it always boils down to a question of ethics. Now all eyes are directed toward US President Barack Obama. What will he do? He has the arsenal required to make a renewed attempt, but he apparently also has greater scruples.

Merkel Skeptical

The same holds true for the Europeans. At their summit in Brussels on Friday, European Union leaders called for Gadhafi to immediately resign. Although a military operation has not been ruled out, it has been made contingent on the approval of the United Nations, the Arab League and the African Union. Speaking after the meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel underscored that she was highly skeptical about a no-fly zone. The EU is relying on economic sanctions for the time being.

This is a nightmarish situation for the West. For years, Europe and America have courted Gadhafi and regarded him as a valuable business partner, without giving so much as a second thought to the suffering of his people. Now a large proportion of this oppressed population is fighting for its freedom, but the West is doing little to halt the advances made by Gadhafi's loyal supporters. The West wants to help, but it remains helpless.

In this situation, the countries of the West are damned if they do, damned if they don't. If they only sit back and watch, they tacitly accept that Gadhafi will probably crush the rebellion and take terrible revenge. If they intervene, they will have to be prepared to kill, and innocent people may die. And if they enter into this conflict, they will need a concrete exit strategy.

Iraq and Afghanistan

As politicians in Europe and America grapple with the issue of Libya, they are strongly influenced by the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Two predominantly Muslim countries have been attacked and occupied, also with the aim of creating a better world according to Western models. But these have not been success stories. The regimes backed by the West have been dubious, to say the least, and the security situation remains precarious. After more than nine years of fighting, war continues to rage in Afghanistan.

The negative experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have sown doubt in America and Europe about the morality of these missions. Gadhafi benefits from these misgivings, but that doesn't mean that they are wrong.

There is no easy solution for Libya à la Reagan -- whose botched bombing mission didn't solve anything anyway. There is only a long and difficult search for a way to help the country's population, without upsetting the population in Europe, which would like to avoid at all costs another protracted war in a Muslim country.

As a preliminary step, the US has severed all ties with the "existing Libyan Embassy" in Washington, but continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Libya. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will travel to northern Africa this week to meet with Gadhafi's rivals. According to the State Department, she has already contacted members of the opposition, both inside and outside of Libya.

Obama Rules Out Unilateral Action

Military action is also being discussed. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels last Thursday: "We agree that we will continue with the planning of all military options."

But the Obama administration has ruled out taking unilateral action. White House Chief of Staff Bill Daley recently said: "All options are on the table. But it has to be an international mission."

Since a UN resolution currently appears unlikely, NATO is the only organization that comes into question for joint military operations. A high-ranking US government official said in Brussels last Wednesday: "The US believes that NATO is the natural choice for a military operation."

But Obama continues to hesitate, and this lack of action is drawing increasing criticism. James Clapper, the US Director of National Intelligence, recently warned a Senate committee that the opposition won't be able to topple the dictator on its own. Republican Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain and independent Senator Joe Lieberman are both criticizing Obama's reluctance to intervene. They say that he has to do more to support the opposition. McCain, for his part, is calling for a no-fly zone.

'Anybody Who Proposes a No-Fly Zone Should Say Who Will Enforce It'

That step, however, is highly controversial in Washington. The US military, which has already been stretched thin by its deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq, has remained rather reticent in its comments. Establishing a no-fly zone would be a "challenge," says General James Mattis, the

commander of US Central Command. The US military would first have to destroy Libya's air defenses, he says.

Until now, the US military has limited its engagement to bolstering its fleet in the Mediterranean and sending ships to the waters off the Libyan coast.

For the EU it will be even more difficult to come to a joint position on Libya, although that didn't stop French President Nicolas Sarkozy from unilaterally taking action. Last Thursday, France recognized the Libyan National Transitional Council in Benghazi as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. Sarkozy says that he intends to dispatch an ambassador there. Furthermore, government officials in Paris say that the French president wants to use targeted air strikes to weaken the Gadhafi regime.

The German government was not informed of Sarkozy's plans. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle was talking with his new French counterpart, Alain Juppé, when he heard about the French proposal. Westerwelle had the impression that Juppé was also unaware of his country's new position.

'We Have to Think This Through'

In Berlin, the Chancellery was indignant over the French initiative. At the summit in Brussels, Merkel voiced her clear opposition: "We cannot recognize the transitional council," she told the assembled heads of state and government. "The former justice minister is a member of this body and look at the role he played in the case of the Bulgarian nurses."

Indeed, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov has claimed that representatives of the transitional council are linked to the mistreatment of a Palestinian doctor and five Bulgarian nurses held for nearly eight years under what is widely believed to have been a false conviction on charges of infecting children with HIV at a hospital in Benghazi. In 2007, after long negotiations with the EU, the medical workers were [pardoned](#) and returned to Bulgaria.

On Friday, Merkel repeated her position in English: "On transitional council, don't recognize."

Merkel also clearly expressed her reservations with regard to a no-fly zone: "What is our plan if we create a no-fly zone and it doesn't work? Do we send in ground troops?" she asked before adding: "We have to think this through. Why should we intervene in Libya when we don't intervene elsewhere?"

It was a sharp rebuff for Sarkozy. European leaders have little doubt about his motives. French foreign policy in Northern Africa has relied far too long on despots like Tunisia's Zine El

Abidine Ben Ali. Sarkozy now intends to rectify the situation. He fears that France could lose its traditional leadership role in the region.

Until recently, France and Germany have had their separate areas of responsibility: While Paris looked after the Mediterranean area, Berlin was more oriented toward Eastern Europe. But in internal discussions, Westerwelle has already made it clear that this will no longer be the case. Much to the annoyance of the French, Berlin now also wants to have a greater say in the Mediterranean region.

Fears Germany Could Be Drawn In

Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Westerwelle agree that nothing good will come from a no-fly zone over Libya. They both fear that Germany could be drawn into the civil war in this way. The government also knows, though, that economic sanctions are only effective over the long term, so Berlin doesn't want to entirely rule out the option of military intervention. The obstacles are significant, however, since China and Russia are showing little inclination to approve such a mission in the UN Security Council.

The German government's hesitant stance also arises from the fact that Germany recently won a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. Although this presents an excellent opportunity for Westerwelle to play a more prominent international role as foreign minister, it also means that Germany will probably have to participate in the mission if the Security Council approves a no-fly zone. Anyone who claims a leading role in New York must be prepared to assume certain responsibilities.

The opposition also supports the German government's position. No one in Berlin is calling for [a no-fly zone](#) without a mandate from the Security Council. But there are members of parliament who refuse to simply stand by and watch as Gadhafi massacres his own people.

A no-fly zone would entail enormous technical and political problems, argues Kerstin Müller, the foreign policy expert in parliament for Germany's traditionally dovish Green Party. "But if the situation worsens and Gadhafi hunts down people from the air and kills them," she adds, "then the international community will have to seriously consider a no-fly zone area."

Before that happens, however, all non-military options must first be exhausted and the risks of escalation carefully weighed up, Müller says. She points out that an increasing number of Libyan opposition figures are calling for the West to intervene. Müller says that there is also an international responsibility to protect people.

Philipp Missfelder, the foreign policy expert in parliament for Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), also refuses to rule out a no-fly zone. "If you want to show the regime

that you mean business," he argues, "then you have to put a few options on the table." He says that using fighter jets to shoot at demonstrators could definitely be classified as a crime against humanity. Missfelder emphasizes that any intervention would first have to be approved by the Security Council.

The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the German parliament, Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), is also calling for restraint. "What happens if the no-fly zone doesn't work?" he asks. "Then this will immediately be followed by the demand: You have taken the first step, now you have to take the second one."

The clearest arguments against a military intervention by the West are presented by Rainer Stinner, the foreign policy expert in parliament for the pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP), which is Merkel's government coalition partner. "Anyone who proposes a no-fly zone should (also) say who will enforce it," he contends. Such a decision could lead to aerial combat and other fighting, he says. "Should we then send in the German Luftwaffe?"

Limited Success of No-Fly Zones

The experience of the West with no-fly zones has shown that such measures can quickly lead to combat situations. For instance, without a prior mandate from the Security Council, between 1991 and 2003 the Americans imposed a ban on flying over the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq and the Shiite regions in the south of the country. There were numerous clashes. US fighter jets shelled Iraqi anti-aircraft positions and shot down Iraqi fighters.

The no-fly zones enjoyed only limited success. Under the protection of coalition forces, the Kurds in northern Iraq were able to establish an autonomous zone. Since helicopter gunships were excluded at first from the flight ban, however, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was able to quash Shiite rebellions in the south of the country.

There were also military clashes in the no-fly zone that NATO established between 1993 to 1995 during the war in Bosnia. NATO aircraft shot down a number of Serbian fighter jets. Nonetheless, this did not allow NATO to prevent the Srebrenica massacre, where 8,000 Bosnians were killed.

Another problem has to do with the issue of who benefits from what type of intervention by the West. Too little is known about the rebels and their objectives. Even diplomats in Tripoli know little about most of the men on the opposition's interim governing council. The only exceptions are Ali Al-Issawi, until recently the Libyan ambassador to India and currently the insurgents' "foreign minister," and Mahmoud Jibril, the former Iraqi planning minister. Last week in Paris and Brussels, both men called for international support.

Another Unpopular War?

The chairman of the National Transitional Council, former Libyan Justice Minister Mustafa Abdul Jalil, is not a charismatic figure, but on a number of occasions he has publicly interceded on behalf of political prisoners held by Gadhafi's regime. His National Council is hopelessly divided and could only agree on three points: Gadhafi must go, the West should impose a no-fly zone, but Western troops should not fight on the ground.

Nobody knows what kind of state these men want to build, or what freedoms it would guarantee. President Hamid Karzai -- intensely pandered to by the West -- has turned out to be a corrupt ruler in Afghanistan.

In Libya there is also no solution that would genuinely satisfy the West. There is no clear, promising vision of the future of this country without Gadhafi -- but there is no doubt that it will be disastrous with Gadhafi.

Is military deployment the answer? [Germany could easily be drawn into another war](#) at a time when the majority of Germans already oppose their country's military presence in Afghanistan. Sometimes politicians have little choice but to grin and bear the burden of their own decisions.