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Iran in a dilemma over Libya

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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The ongoing crisis in Libya has presented Iran with a vexing policy dilemma. Last week's decision by the Arab League (AL) to call for a no-fly zone in Libya has been greeted with a mixture of a shy nod plus a deep frown in Tehran.

The ambiguity from Tehran is a reflection of sentiments torn between siding with AL allies like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon - and thus avoiding a policy split on a serious regional issue - or standing firm on traditional opposition to Western intervention - and thus saving relations with other allies, such as the leftist governments in Latin America that rushed to defend Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

So far Iran has officially communicated both positions. Iran's top envoy to the United Nations, Mohammad Khazaei, emphasized the importance of respecting national sovereignties and disallowing certain powers to bypass international law and intervene under guises such as "humanitarian intervention". Simultaneously, top Iranian officials including President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and various Tehran editorialists have lambasted the embattled Gaddafi for his militia's brutal suppression of Libyan people, with the conservative daily Kayhan even going further. In a story under the headline "brutal massacre in Libya is a humanitarian disaster" it accused the Libyan government of indiscriminate bombardment of civilian centers in "rebel-held territories".

Similarly, an article on IRDiplomacy.com by Hojatollah Jowdaki, on "Libya's contradiction between appearance and substance", points to Gaddafi's anti-imperialist demagoguery and corrupt self-interest having no real resemblance to (Egyptian Gamal Abdul) Nasserite Arab

nationalism. The article ends by calling for Gaddafi's departure and the installation of an electoral system in Libya after 42 years of dictatorship.

An important reason for Iran's hostility toward Gaddafi is his role in kidnapping the Lebanese spiritual-political leader, Musa Sadr, some 33 years ago, in light of a statement by his daughter last week that her father was still alive in Libya. The issue goes to the heart of inter-Arab rivalry and no matter what the Iranian present misgiving about a no-fly zone, weighs heavily on Iranian policymakers.

"Iran and Libya have had relatively decent relations, both at the United Nations, where both nations have condemned Israel's atrocities, and in terms of common approaches to regional issues, that was emphasized at a joint communique during January 2010 Libya visit by Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki," said a Tehran University political science professor who declined to be identified. [1]

Fear of Western roll-back

There is a growing sentiment in Tehran that the West's real intention in Libya is to capitalize on Gaddafi's repressive gains over the opposition to generate a region-wide counter-momentum vis-a-vis the popular upsurge throughout the Arab world that has destabilized the US-backed status quo.

A clue to this can be seen in US President Barack Obama's declared shift away from "idealism" toward "pragmatism" with respect to the Middle East turmoil, which was broadcast on the front page of New York Times last week, thus signaling an administration with a higher tolerance for state violence against mass protests in the region.

One may take issue with the "realism" of a new American approach that, just as in the past, prioritizes "stability" of the oppressive status quo over democratic rights - after all there is nothing "pragmatic" about being on the wrong side of history and swimming against the currents of great political change. Nonetheless it makes sense from the US "neo-imperial" interests, especially in the oil region of Persian Gulf populated by archaic sheikhdoms.

Assuming that the tides are turning in favor of Gaddafi, whose forces have retaken some of the rebel strongholds in the past few days, the whole noise about a no-fly zone may soon evaporate under the "realism" that may be a remedy too late. Already, a large number of US policy experts, such as Richard Haas, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, have taken a firm stance against the no-fly zone, one lame argument being that "aircrafts and helicopters are not central to the regime's military advantage". [2]

The Libyan opposition may differ, in light of reports that two Libyan fighter jet pilots defected to Malta because they refused to carry out the government's order to "bomb the population".

In fact, over the past couple of weeks, Western media have shown a clear tendency to sow doubts about the levels of Gaddafi's brutality, even to the point of a white wash, no small thanks to the smart public relations ploy by Gaddafi and his son, reminding the West of how good their

business with Libya has been, blaming al-Qaeda and labeling the opposition as "deceived youth", anti-democratic "monarchists" etc.

The fact that Western media suddenly reverted to the singular depiction of the opposition as "rebels" that implicitly drained it of a democratic facade was another step in the direction of directly and indirectly helping Gaddafi win the civil war.

As a result, future historians may tell the story of Libya's 2011 revolt as a unique story of how the West saved the regime by actually threatening it. There is the other distinct, though less likely, possibility that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will impose a no-fly zone and Libya would for the foreseeable future be disintegrated as a unified nation.

This is hardly a good prospect for the Europeans, who have major vested interests in the country, but not necessarily a bad scenario from the prism of US interests, which can then use Libya as yet another leverage over Europe to toe its line on various international issues, including Iran.

Either way, the US is bound to harvest a windfall from both action (a no-fly zone) as well as inaction (rhetoric without action on a no-fly zone); in the latter scenario, a surviving Gaddafi will be beholden to the US more than ever before, his future mortgaged to submission to US interests and policy desires.

In turn, this raises serious questions about the soundness of the pro-Gaddafi stance adopted by various leftist governments, such as Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, and leftist groups in the US and Europe, who have focused on the threats of US interventionism via a no-fly zone as their number one priority, often buying Gaddafi's propaganda about the "rebels" as a combination of pro-West armed monarchists, Central Intelligence Agency-trained, etc.

Often, the leftist discourses show a naive embrace of the official Washington narrative, overlooking the discrepancy between the declared and actual policies and thus playing into the hands of the very imperialists they love to criticize. Hence, the advantage of the Arab League's call for a no-fly zone may well be that it calls into question this discrepancy and highlights the importance of supporting Libyan people's quest for democracy after decades of total and complete political disenfranchisement.

From Iran's vantage point, there are pros and cons to the AL's initiative and also to the diametrically opposed stance of the African Union, whose Peace and Security Council has rejected the no-fly zone idea, offering mediation instead. Any visit by an African Union delegation may be a step in the right direction to diffuse the crisis in Libya, but is unlikely to put a stop to the murderous acts against the opposition by Gaddafi.

A middle position between the Arab League and the African Union appears to be Iran's best policy course, given Libya's distance and its marginal role in Iran's national security calculus, save the implication of a US roll-back strategy that may start in Libya but has its real eyes set over Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.