

The Evil of Humanitarian Wars

Iraq, Libya, Syria: "We Have No Right to Play God". Or Do We?

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In a traditional cowboy movie, we know what to do: we look for the guy wearing the white hat to be sure who to cheer, and for the one wearing the black hat to know who deserves to die, preferably gruesomely, before the credits roll. If Hollywood learnt early to play on these most tribal of emotions, do we doubt that Washington's political script-writers are any less sophisticated?

Since 9/11, the United States and its allies in Europe have persuaded us that they are waging a series of "white hat" wars against "black hat" regimes in the Middle East. Each has been sold to us misleadingly as a "humanitarian intervention". The cycle of such wars is still far from complete.

But over the course of the past decade, the presentation of these wars has necessarily changed. As Hollywood well understands, audiences quickly tire of the same contrived plot. Invention, creativity and ever greater complexity are needed to sustain our emotional engagement.

Declarations by Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu aside, there are only so many times we can be convinced that there is a new Hitler in the Middle East, and that the moment is rapidly approaching when this evil mastermind will succeed in developing a doomsday weapon designed to wipe out Israel, the US, or maybe the planet.

In 1950s Hollywood, the solution for audience ennui was simple: High Noon put the noble sheriff, Gary Cooper, in a black hat, and the evil gunslinger in a white one. It offered a veneer of complexity, but in reality the same good guy-bad guy formula played out along familiar lines.

If Washington required a new storyline after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, it did not have to work hard to write one. It was assisted by the rapid changes taking place in the political environment of the Middle East: the so-called Arab Spring. Washington could hardly have overlooked the emotionally satisfying twists and turns presented by the awakening of popular forces against the deadening hand of autocratic regimes, many of them installed decades ago by the West.

The reality, of course, is that the US and its allies are pursuing the same agenda as before the Arab Spring: that is, they are looking to preserve their own geo-political interests. In that regard, they are trying to contain and reverse dangerous manifestations of the awakening, especially in Egypt, the most populous and influential of the Arab states, and in the Gulf, our pipeline to the world's most abundant oil reserves.

But for Washington, the Arab Spring presented opportunities as well as threats, and these are being keenly exploited.

Both Afghanistan and Iraq followed a model of “intervention” that is now widely discredited and probably no longer viable for a West struggling with economic decline. It is not an easy sell to Western publics that our armies should single-handedly invade, occupy and “fix” Middle Eastern states, especially given how ungrateful the recipients of our largesse have proven to be.

Humanitarian wars might have run into the sand at this point had the Arab Spring not opened up new possibilities for “intervening”.

The Arab awakening created a fresh set of dynamics in the Middle East that countered the dominance of the traditional military and political elites: democratic and Islamist forces were buoyed with new confidence; business elites spied domestic economic opportunities through collaboration with the West; and oppressed ethnic, religious and tribal groups saw a chance to settle old scores.

Not surprisingly, Washington has shown more interest in cultivating the latter two groups than the first.

In Libya, the US and its allies in Nato took off the white hat and handed it to the so-called rebels, comprising mostly tribes out of favour with Gadaffi. The West took a visible role, especially in its bombing sorties, but one that made sure the local actors were presented as in the driving seat. The West was only too happy to appear as if relegated to a minor role: enabling the good guys.

After Libya’s outlaw, Muammar Gadaffi, was beaten to death by the rebels last year, the credits rolled. The movie was over for Western audiences. But for Libyans a new film began, in a language foreign to our ears and with no subtitles. What little information has seeped out since suggests that Libya is now mired in lawlessness, no better than the political waste lands we ourselves created in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hundreds of regional militias run the country, extorting, torturing and slaughtering those who oppose them.

Few can doubt that Syria is next on the West’s hit list. And this time, the script-writers in Washington seem to believe that the task of turning a functioning, if highly repressive, state into a basket case can be achieved without the West’s hand being visible at all. This time the white hat has been assigned to our allies, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, who, according to the latest reports, are stoking an incipient civil war not only by arming some among the rebels but also by preparing to pay them salaries too, in petro-dollars.

The importance to Western governments of developing more “complex” narratives about intervention has been driven by the need to weaken domestic opposition to continuing Middle East wars. The impression that these wars are being inspired and directed exclusively from “inside”, even if by a heterogeneous opposition whose composition remains murky to outsiders, adds a degree of extra legitimacy; and additionally, it suggests to Western publics that the cost in treasure and casualties will not be born by us.

Whereas there was a wide consensus in favour of attacking Afghanistan, Western opinion

split, especially in Europe, over the question of invading Iraq in the same manner. In the post 9/11 world, the villain in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, seemed a more credible threat to Western interests than Saddam Hussein. The critics of Operation Shock and Awe were proven resoundingly right.

The Arab awakenings, however, provided a different storyline for subsequent Western intervention — one that Washington had tried weakly to advance in Iraq too, after Saddam's WMD could not be located. It was no longer about finding a doomsday person or weapon, but about a civilising mission to bring democracy to oppressed peoples.

In the era before the Arab Spring, this risked looking like just another ploy to promote Western interests. But afterwards, it seemed far more plausible. It mattered little whether the local actors were democratic elements seeking a new kind of politics or feuding ethnic groups seeking control of the old politics for their own, vengeful ends. The goal of the West was to co-opt them, willingly or not, to the new narrative.

This move effectively eroded popular opposition to the next humanitarian war, in Libya, and looks like it is already achieving the same end in Syria.

Certainly, it has fatally undermined effective dissent from the left, which has squabbled and splintered over each of these humanitarian wars. A number of leading leftwing intellectuals lined up behind the project to overthrow Gaddafi, and more of them are already applauding the same fate for Syria's Bashar Assad. There is now only a rump of critical leftwing opinion steadfast in its opposition to yet another attempt by the West to engineer an Arab state's implosion.

If this were simply a cowboy movie, none of this would be of more than incidental interest. Gaddafi was, and Assad is, an outlaw. But international politics is far more complex than a Hollywood script, as should be obvious if we paused for a moment to reflect on what kind of sheriffs we have elected and re-elected in the West. George Bush, Tony Blair and Barack Obama probably have more blood on their hands than any Arab autocrat.

Many on the left are struggling to analyse the new Middle East with anything approaching the sophistication of Washington's military planners. This failure derives in large part from a willingness to allow the war-merchants to blur the meaningful issues — on the regimes, the opposition groups and the media coverage — related to each "humanitarian intervention".

Yes, the regimes selected for destruction are uniformly brutal and ugly towards their own people. Yes, the nature of their rule should be denounced. Yes, the world would be better off without them. But this is no reason for the West to wage wars against them, at least not so long as the world continues to be configured the way it is into competing and self-interested nation states.

Nearly all states in the Middle East have appalling human rights records, some of them with even fewer redeeming features than Gaddafi's Libya or Assad's Syria. But then those states, such as Saudi Arabia, are close allies of the West. Only the terminally naïve or dishonest argue that the states targeted by the West have been selected for the benefit of their long-suffering citizens. Rather, they have been chosen because they are seen as implacably opposed to American and Israeli interests in the region.

Even in the case of Libya, where Gadaffi's threat to the West was far from clear to many observers, Western geo-political interests were, in fact, dominant. Dan Glazebrook, a journalist specialising in Western foreign policy, has noted that shortly before the West turned its sights on Libya Gadaffi had begun galvanising African opposition to Africom, the Africa command established by the US military in 2008.

Africom's role is to organise and direct African troops to fight to ensure, in the words of a US Vice-Admiral, "the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market". In overthrowing Gadaffi, Africom both removed the main challenger to its plan and put into effect its mission statement: not a single US or European soldier died in the operation to unseat Gadaffi.

Highlighting the hypocrisy at the heart of the interventionist agenda should not be dismissed as simple whataboutery. The West's mendacity fatally undermines the rationale for intervention, stripping it of any semblance of legitimacy. It also ensures that those who are our allies in these military adventures, such as Saudi Arabia, are the ones who will ultimately get to shape the regimes that emerge out of the rubble.

And yes too, the peoples of the Arab world have the right to live in freedom and dignity. Yes, they are entitled to rise up against their dictators. Yes, they have the right to our moral sympathy, to our advice and to our best efforts at diplomacy in their cause. But they have no right to expect us to go to war on their behalf, or to arm them, or to bring their governments down for them.

This principle should hold because, as the world is currently configured, humanitarian intervention guarantees not a new moral order but rather the law of the jungle. Even if the West could be trusted to wage just wars, rather than ones to promote the interests of its elites, how could we ever divine what action was needed to achieve a just outcome - all the more so in the still deeply divided societies of the Middle East?

Is the average Libyan safer because we pulverised his or her country with bombs, because we crushed its institutions, good and bad alike, because we left it politically and socially adrift, and because we then handed arms and power to tribal groups so that they could wreak revenge on their predecessors? It is doubtful. But even if the answer is unclear, in the absence of certainty we are obliged to follow the medical maxim: "First, do no harm".

It is the height of arrogance - no, more a God complex - to be as sure as some of our politicians and pundits that we deserve the gratitude of Iraqis for overthrowing Saddam Hussein at the likely cost of more than a million Iraqi lives and millions more forced into exile.

Societies cannot have democracy imposed from without, as though it were an item to be ordered from a lunch menu. The West's democracies, imperfect as they are, were fought for by their peoples over centuries at great cost, including horrific wars. Each state developed its own checks and balances to cope with the unique political, social and economic conditions that prevailed there. Those hard-won freedoms are under constant threat, not least from the very same political and economic elites that so vociferously campaign for humanitarian interventions abroad.

The reality is that greater freedoms are not awarded by outside benefactors; they are

struggled for and won by the people themselves. No modern society achieved democracy except through a gradual, painful struggle, where lessons were learnt, often through error, where reverses and setbacks were plentiful, and where lasting success came with the realisation by all sides that legitimacy could not be secured through violence. If we owe other societies struggling for freedom anything, it is our solidarity, not access to our government's arsenals.

In fact, the West's duty is not to intervene more but to intervene far less. We already massively arm tyrannies such as those in the Gulf so that they can protect the oil that we consider our birthright; we offer military, financial and diplomatic cover for Israel's continuing oppression of millions of Palestinians, a major cause of political instability in the Middle East; and we quietly support the Egyptian military, which is currently trying to reverse last year's revolutionary gains.

Popular support for humanitarian wars could not be maintained without the spread of propaganda masquerading as news by our corporate-owned media. Over the past decade they have faithfully marketed the Middle East agendas of our war-making governments. As the fanciful pretext for each war is exposed, the armchair generals assure us that the lessons have been learnt for next time. But when the script is given a makeover – and the white hat passed to a new lawman – the same discredited media pundits justify war yet again from the safety of their studios.

This is another reason to tread cautiously. In the case of Syria, the source of the certainty expressed by our newsrooms is often no more than a one-man outfit in the British town of Coventry known as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. If Rami Abdulrahman did not exist, our interventionist governments and their courtiers in the media would have had to invent him. The Observatory produces the anti-regime news needed to justify another war.

This is not to argue that Assad's regime has not committed war crimes. Rather, it is that, even were "humanitarian interventions" a legitimate undertaking, we have no consistently reliable information to make an assessment of how best we can intervene, based on the "news" placed in our media by partisan groups to the conflict. All that is clear is that we are once again being manipulated, and to a known end.

These are grounds enough to oppose another humanitarian war. But there is an additional reason why it is foolhardy in the extreme for those on the left to play along with West's current agenda in Syria, even if they genuinely believe that ordinary Syrians will be the beneficiaries.

If the West succeeds in its slow-motion, proxy intervention in Syria and disables yet another Arab state for refusing to toe its line, the stage will be set for the next war against the next target: Iran.

That is not an argument condoning Assad's continuing rule. Syrians should be left to make that decision.

But it is an admonition to those who justify endless meddling in the Middle East in the service of a Western agenda. It is a caution against waging wars whose destructive power is directed chiefly at civilians. It is a warning that none of these humanitarian wars is a solution to a problem; they are only a prelude to yet more war. And it is a reminder that we have no

right to play God.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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