

Published on *STRATFOR* (<http://www.stratfor.com>)

[Home](#) > Immaculate Intervention: The Wars of Humanitarianism

Immaculate Intervention: The Wars of Humanitarianism

Created Apr 5 2011 - 03:49



By George Friedman

There are wars in pursuit of interest. In these wars, nations pursue economic or strategic ends to protect the nation or expand its power. There are also wars of ideology, designed to spread some idea of “the good,” whether this good is religious or secular. The two obviously can be intertwined, such that a war designed to spread an ideology also strengthens the interests of the nation spreading the ideology.

Since World War II, a new class of war has emerged that we might call humanitarian wars — wars in which the combatants claim to be fighting neither for their national interest nor to impose any ideology, but rather to prevent inordinate human suffering. In Kosovo and now in Libya, this has been defined as stopping a government from committing mass murder. But it is not confined to that. In the 1990s, the U.S. intervention in Somalia was intended to alleviate a famine while the invasion of Haiti was designed to remove a corrupt and oppressive regime causing grievous suffering.

It is important to distinguish these interventions from peacekeeping missions. In a peacekeeping mission, third-party forces are sent to oversee some agreement reached by combatants. Peacekeeping operations are not conducted to impose a settlement by force of arms; rather, they are conducted to oversee a settlement by a neutral force. In the event the agreement collapses and war resumes, the peacekeepers either withdraw or take cover. They are soldiers, but they are not there to fight beyond protecting themselves.

Concept vs. Practice

In humanitarian wars, the intervention is designed both to be neutral and to protect

potential victims on one side. It is at this point that the concept and practice of a humanitarian war becomes more complex. There is an ideology undergirding humanitarian wars, one derived from both the U.N. Charter and from the lessons drawn from the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia and a range of other circumstances where large-scale slaughter — crimes against humanity — took place. That no one intervened to prevent or stop these atrocities was seen as a moral failure. According to this ideology, the international community has an obligation to prevent such slaughter.

This ideology must, of course, confront other principles of the U.N. Charter, such as the right of nations to self-determination. In international wars, where the aggressor is trying to both kill large numbers of civilians and destroy the enemy's right to national self-determination, this does not pose a significant intellectual problem. In internal unrest and civil war, however, the challenge of the intervention is to protect human rights without undermining national sovereignty or the right of national self-determination.

The doctrine becomes less coherent in a civil war in which one side is winning and promising to slaughter its enemies, Libya being the obvious example. Those intervening can claim to be carrying out a neutral humanitarian action, but in reality, they are intervening on one side's behalf. If the intervention is successful — as it likely will be given that interventions are invariably by powerful countries against weaker ones — the practical result is to turn the victims into victors. By doing that, the humanitarian warriors are doing more than simply protecting the weak. They are also defining a nation's history.

There is thus a deep tension between the principle of national self-determination and the obligation to intervene to prevent slaughter. Consider a case such as Sudan, where it can be argued that the regime is guilty of crimes against humanity but also represents the will of the majority of the people in terms of its religious and political program. It can be argued reasonably that a people who would support such a regime have lost the right to national self-determination, and that it is proper that a regime be imposed on it from the outside. But that is rarely the argument made in favor of humanitarian intervention. I call humanitarian wars immaculate intervention, because most advocates want to see the outcome limited to preventing war crimes, not extended to include regime change or the imposition of alien values. They want a war of immaculate intentions surgically limited to a singular end without other consequences. And this is where the doctrine of humanitarian war unravels.

Regardless of intention, any intervention favors the weaker side. If the side were not weak, it would not be facing mass murder; it could protect itself. Given that the intervention must be military, there must be an enemy. Wars by military forces are fought against enemies, not for abstract concepts. The enemy will always be the stronger side. The question is why that side is stronger. Frequently, this is because a great many people in the country, most likely a majority, support that side. Therefore, a humanitarian war designed to prevent the slaughter of the minority must many times undermine the will of the majority. Thus, the intervention may begin with limited goals but almost immediately becomes an attack on what was, up to that point, the legitimate government of a country.

A Slow Escalation

The solution is to intervene gently. In the case of Libya, this began with a no-fly zone that no reasonable person expected to have any significant impact. It proceeded to airstrikes

against Gadhafi's forces, which continued to hold their own against these strikes. It now has been followed by the dispatching of Royal Marines, whose mission is unclear, but whose normal duties are fighting wars. What we are seeing in Libya is a classic slow escalation motivated by two factors. The first is the hope that the leader of the country responsible for the bloodshed will capitulate. The second is a genuine reluctance of intervening nations to spend excessive wealth or blood on a project they view in effect as charitable. Both of these need to be examined.

The expectation of capitulation in the case of Libya is made unlikely by another aspect of humanitarian war fighting, namely the International Criminal Court (ICC). Modeled in principle on the Nuremberg trials and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the ICC is intended to try war criminals. Trying to induce Moammar Gadhafi to leave Libya knowing that what awaits him is trial and the certain equivalent of a life sentence will not work. Others in his regime would not resign for the same reason. When his foreign minister appeared to defect to London, the demand for his trial over Lockerbie and other affairs was immediate. Nothing could have strengthened Gadhafi's position more. His regime is filled with people guilty of the most heinous crimes. There is no clear mechanism for a plea bargain guaranteeing their immunity. While a logical extension of humanitarian warfare — having intervened against atrocities, the perpetrators ought to be brought to justice — the effect is a prolongation of the war. The example of Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia, who ended the Kosovo War with what he thought was a promise that he would not be prosecuted, undoubtedly is on Gadhafi's mind.

But the war is also prolonged by the unwillingness of the intervening forces to inflict civilian casualties. This is reasonable, given that their motivation is to prevent civilian casualties. But the result is that instead of a swift and direct invasion designed to crush the regime in the shortest amount of time, the regime remains intact and civilians and others continue to die. This is not simply a matter of moral squeamishness. It also reflects the fact that the nations involved are unwilling — and frequently blocked by political opposition at home — from the commitment of massive and overwhelming force. The application of minimal and insufficient force, combined with the unwillingness of people like Gadhafi and his equally guilty supporters to face The Hague, creates the framework for a long and inconclusive war in which the intervention in favor of humanitarian considerations turns into an intervention in a civil war on the side that opposes the regime.

This, then, turns into the problem that the virtue of the weaker side may consist only of its weakness. In other words, strengthened by foreign intervention that clears their way to power, they might well turn out just as brutal as the regime they were fighting. It should be remembered that many of Libya's opposition leaders are former senior officials of the Gadhafi government. They did not survive as long as they did in that regime without having themselves committed crimes, and without being prepared to commit more.

In that case, the intervention — less and less immaculate — becomes an exercise in nation-building. Having destroyed the Gadhafi government and created a vacuum in Libya and being unwilling to hand power to Gadhafi's former aides and now enemies, the intervention — now turning into an occupation — must now invent a new government. An invented government is rarely welcome, as the United States discovered in Iraq. At least some of the people resent being occupied regardless of the occupier's original intentions, leading to insurgency. At some point, the interveners have the choice of walking away and leaving chaos, as the United States did in Somalia, or staying for a long time and fighting, as they did in Iraq.

Iraq is an interesting example. The United States posed a series of justifications for its invasion of Iraq, including simply that Saddam Hussein was an amoral monster who had killed hundreds of thousands and would kill more. It is difficult to choose between Hussein and Gadhafi. Regardless of the United States' other motivations in both conflicts, it would seem that those who favor humanitarian intervention would have favored the Iraq war. That they generally opposed the Iraq war from the beginning requires a return to the concept of immaculate intervention.

Hussein was a war criminal and a danger to his people. However, the American justification for intervention was not immaculate. It had multiple reasons, only one of which was humanitarian. Others explicitly had to do with national interest, the claims of nuclear weapons in Iraq and the desire to reshape Iraq. That it also had a humanitarian outcome — the destruction of the Hussein regime — made the American intervention inappropriate in the view of those who favor immaculate interventions for two reasons. First, the humanitarian outcome was intended as part of a broader war. Second, regardless of the fact that humanitarian interventions almost always result in regime change, the explicit intention to usurp Iraq's national self-determination openly undermined in principle what the humanitarian interveners wanted to undermine only in practice.

Other Considerations

The point here is not simply that humanitarian interventions tend to devolve into occupations of countries, albeit more slowly and with more complex rhetoric. It is also that for the humanitarian warrior, there are other political considerations. In the case of the French, the contrast between their absolute opposition to Iraq and their aggressive desire to intervene in Libya needs to be explained. I suspect it will not be.

There has been much speculation that the intervention in Libya was about oil. All such interventions, such as those in Kosovo and Haiti, are examined for hidden purposes. Perhaps it was about oil in this case, but Gadhafi was happily shipping oil to Europe, so intervening to ensure that it continues makes no sense. Some say France's Total and Britain's BP engineered the war to displace Italy's ENI in running the oil fields. While possible, these oil companies are no more popular at home than oil companies are anywhere in the world. The blowback in France or Britain if this were shown to be the real reason would almost certainly cost French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron their jobs, and they are much too fond of those to risk them for oil companies. I am reminded that people kept asserting that the 2003 Iraq invasion was designed to seize Iraq's oil for Texas oilmen. If so, it is taking a long time to pay off. Sometimes the lack of a persuasive reason for a war generates theories to fill the vacuum. In all humanitarian wars, there is a belief that the war could not be about humanitarian matters.

Therein lays the dilemma of humanitarian wars. They have a tendency to go far beyond the original intent behind them, as the interveners, trapped in the logic of humanitarian war, are drawn further in. Over time, the ideological zeal frays and the lack of national interest saps the intervener's will. It is interesting that some of the interventions that bought with them the most good were carried out without any concern for the local population and with ruthless self-interest. I think of Rome and Britain. They were in it for themselves. They did some good incidentally.

My unease with humanitarian intervention is not that I don't think the intent is good and the end moral. It is that the intent frequently gets lost and the moral end is not achieved. Ideology, like passion, fades. But interest has a certain enduring quality. A doctrine of humanitarian warfare that demands an immaculate intervention will fail because the desire to do good is an insufficient basis for war. It does not provide a rigorous military strategy to what is, after all, a war. Neither does it bind a nation's public to the burdens of the intervention. In the end, the ultimate dishonesties of humanitarian war are the claims that "this won't hurt much" and "it will be over fast." In my view, their outcome is usually either a withdrawal without having done much good or a long occupation in which the occupied people are singularly ungrateful.

North Africa is no place for casual war plans and good intentions. It is an old, tough place. If you must go in, go in heavy, go in hard and get out fast. Humanitarian warfare says that you go in light, you go in soft and you stay there long. I have no quarrel with humanitarianism. It is the way the doctrine wages war that concerns me. Getting rid of Gadhafi is something we can all feel good about and which Europe and America can afford. It is the aftermath — the place beyond the immaculate intervention — that concerns me.

[Politics](#) [George Friedman](#) [France](#) [United Kingdom](#) [Libya](#) [United States](#)
[USMC - Featured Analysis](#) [Geopolitical Weekly](#)

Source URL: <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110404-immaculate-intervention-wars-humanitarianism>

Links:

- [1] http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/friedman_on_geopolitics
- [2] http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical_diary/20110317-libya-and-un-no-fly-zone
- [3] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110316-gadhafi-forces-continue-advance-libyan-rebels>
- [4] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20101210-darfur-and-push-southern-sudanese-independence>
- [5] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110317-intelligence-guidance-un-authorizes-no-fly-zone-over-libya>
- [6] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110329-libyan-airstrikes-march-28-29-2011>
- [7] http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical_diary/20110330-what-koussas-defection-means-gadhafi-libya-and-west
- [8] http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20100215_special_coverage_us_withdrawal_iraq
- [9] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110323-europes-libya-intervention-france-and-united-kingdom>
- [10] <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110221-international-effects-libyan-unrest-energy>