

Amitai Etzioni

Unintended Consequences

WAR CRIMES IN LIBYA

However good the reasons for our intervention in Libya, we and our allies failed to stop some terrible deeds committed by the rebels we supported. U.S. officials have talked a lot about making sure the rebels commit themselves to a democratic regime and do not impose sharia law. But for the most part officials were mum when the rebels—under the cover of our military support—committed one atrocity after another. If we ever ally ourselves with another armed rebellion, say in Syria, we should make it clear that our support will be granted only as long as rebels refrain from committing the kinds of crimes against humanity we are trying to protect them from.

Our reason for intervening in Libya was a humanitarian one. President Barack Obama warned that Qaddafi's oppression of protesters could lead to "violence on a horrific scale." We paid little attention when the rebels began, almost immediately, to abuse other Libyans. Amnesty International released a report detailing war crimes committed by the rebels beginning as early as February 2011. They had detained, tortured, and lynched pro-Qaddafi loyalists (as well as some who were only assumed to be pro-Qaddafi). Those not murdered were tortured with electric rods and beaten with belts, sticks, and metal bars.

More recently, mass graves have been found. Many of the bodies were found to have been shot in the head with their hands tied behind their backs, execution-style. Reports indicate that the rebels often did not wait to determine if people were actually involved in the fighting, but assumed, on the basis of where the people were or what they looked like, that they were Qaddafi loyalists.

Evidence shows that black Libyans and foreign migrant workers were specifically targeted by the rebels in what appear to be acts of ethnic cleansing. African Union chairman Jean Ping said that the rebels' National Transitional Council (NTC) assumes that "all blacks are mercenaries.... They are killing people, normal workers, mistreating them." Reporters witnessed the abuse of hundreds of black Africans who were detained, beaten, and killed indiscriminately. Rebels have also been accused of frequent and widespread rape of women in the black refugee camps outside Tripoli.

Entire cities have been turned into ghost towns. Residents of Tawergha, which was a Qaddafi stronghold, were reportedly forced out of their homes when rebels took the city. Most buildings were destroyed and many were ransacked. Though Tawergha had been used as a base by Qaddafi supporters, there is evidence that the attack on its primarily black population was racially motivated. People have been abducted in the streets and forced to relocate to refugee

camps—simply for being from Tawergha. Tawergha is just one of the towns that faced retribution; more reports of "disappeared" villages and ransacked cities are now surfacing. Zlitan, another town taken by the rebels, has been turned into a ghost town. The NTC has thus far declined to investigate the massacre of over fifty people in Sirte, Qaddafi's hometown. Human Rights Watch has called those killings an "apparent mass execution."

All these war crimes were widely reported, but most Western voices, in government and in the press, spoke mainly about how important it is that the rebels be good democrats—or worried that the rebels might send a large number of fighters to attack U.S. and allied forces in Iraq. A report published by two French think tanks warned that, among the rebels, "true democrats" were in the minority. Since then, Western leaders have had plenty to say about what the rebels ought to be doing now, but little about what they did during the conflict that brought them to power. President Nicolas Sarkozy has promised that "France and Europe will be at [the rebels'] side, for peace, for democracy, and for economic progress." President Obama sees the Libyan mission as a model of international cooperation in the face of tyranny: "This is how the international community should work in the twenty-first century." In a speech at the UN, Obama spoke about the need for democratic reform in a newly liberated Libya: "We all know what's needed...new laws and a constitution that upholds the rule of law...and, for the first time in Libyan history, free and fair elections." He did not mention the atrocities committed by the forces we supported. (After Qaddafi was lynched and one of his sons executed, there were finally some murmurs in the West that this is not the way to handle things.)

We obviously cannot rewind history and restore the lives of innocent victims. We can, however, draw lessons for other humanitarian interventions. Those with whom we ally ourselves should realize—should be *made* to realize—that our support is not unconditional. They should be informed, from the very beginning, that we will scale back air cover and military supplies if we find that they are using them to lay waste to towns just because they house loyalists of the outgoing regime. And we shall leave them to their own devices if they torture, plunder, and rape. Our future allies should know that we hold that all people, on all sides, are God's children and are entitled to basic human rights. ■

Amitai Etzioni is a University Professor at George Washington University and author of The New Golden Rule, The Moral Dimension, and The Active Society.