

REGISTER FOR ONLINE ACCESS

LOG IN

Search the LRB

Submit

London Review of Books

LATEST	ARCHIVE	BOOKSHOP	CONTACT US	ABOUT THE LRB	SUBSCRIBE
CURRENT ISSUE	CONTENTS	LETTERS	CLASSIFIED	BLOG	RSS



Letters

Vol. 33 No. 24 · 15 December 2011

Year: 2011 Issue: 24 GO

SEND LETTERS TO:

The Editor
London Review of Books

28 Little Russell Street
London WC1A 2HN
letters@lrb.co.uk

Please include name,
address, and work and
home telephone numbers.

Who said Gaddafi had to go?

My admiration for Hugh Roberts as a North Africa scholar and analyst of Islamic activism remains unbounded (*LRB*, 17 November). I was president of the International Crisis Group from 2000 to 2009, and I believe that our 2005 report *Understanding Islamism*, of which he was the primary author, was one of the finest and most influential ICG ever produced. But I am deeply underwhelmed by his lengthy attempt to demonstrate that the military intervention in Libya was nothing more than a rerun of the 'war party' bombing for democracy in Iraq.

The Security Council did not invoke 'democratic principles' to justify the military intervention, but rather the 'responsibility to protect': a principle devised – by the commission sponsored by Canada which I co-chaired with the Algerian diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun in 2001 – in the wake of the atrocities in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s and the indifference and inaction with which they were met. The principle, embraced unanimously at the UN's 2005 World Summit, has been invoked by the Security Council on at least six occasions.

Whatever the distaste felt for Gaddafi in the West and by the Arab League, it is inconceivable that the 'all necessary measures' resolution in the Security Council would have been pursued, let alone accepted, had there not been a widespread belief (shared by Russia, China and the other abstainers) that Gaddafi's regime had killed many civilian protesters and, in Benghazi, was about to kill a great many more, and that his behaviour over the three weeks since the preceding Security Council resolution showed him to be resistant to the kind of negotiated political settlement that Roberts argues was still possible.

Roberts is on much firmer ground arguing that the subsequent actions of the Nato-led force grievously stretched the formal Security Council mandate for limited civilian protection into an effectively unlimited brief for regime change. I acknowledge the force of the argument that the only way civilians could reliably be protected in areas, such as Tripoli, that were under Gaddafi's control was by removing him. But it would have been much preferable to conduct the operation on a more restrained basis: maintaining a no-fly zone, and attacking any concentration of forces clearly about to put civilians at risk, in Benghazi, Misrata or anywhere else. Beyond that the rebels should have been left to fight their own war. This would undoubtedly have led to a more protracted, probably messier war with even more casualties, and harder domestic politics to manage in the US and Europe, but it would have preserved the integrity of the principle of responsibility to protect, and the consensual basis for its future application.

Gareth Evans
University of Melbourne

Hugh Roberts debunks the wild claims made by some in the Libyan opposition that there would have been a 'genocidal' massacre if Benghazi had not been protected, suggesting instead that not much would have happened beyond the rolling of the thirty-odd heads of the NTC. Yet according to Human Rights Watch the security forces killed more than 170 civilians between 17 and 20 February. Surely the better equipped and more skilful killers of Gaddafi's elite forces would have outdone them? HRW estimates that about a thousand people died during the siege of Misrata: scaling up for Benghazi, a reasonable guess would be that at least 2000 died in Benghazi. This is not a 'genocide', but it seems more significant than Roberts is prepared to grant. He slides towards apologetics when he suggests that Gaddafi was not 'killing his own people' but 'those of his people who were rebelling': he is ignoring the chronology of the revolt, in which armed resistance sprung up in response to the initial slaughter of rebellious, but as yet unarmed Libyan citizens.

Roberts argues that the whole operation was unnecessary in any case, because Libya's problems could have been resolved by arranging a ceasefire followed by negotiations for political reform. The Gaddafi regime did respond to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 by proclaiming a ceasefire and cessation of military operations on 18 March.

