

October 20, 2011

Global National Interview with Dawna Friesen

IT'S BEEN REVEALED THAT FRANCE PROVIDED WEAPONS, MUNITIONS AND FOOD TO LIBYAN REBELS IN THE WESTERN MOUNTAINS A FEW WEEKS AGO. IT WAS AN EFFORT TO HELP REBELS IN THEIR PUSH TOWARD TRIPOLI. SHOULD WESTERN POWERS BE TAKING THESE KINDS OF STEPS?

Well, the French have a different take on that incident. They say they had been providing humanitarian aid to people under siege in that area and, when the situation worsened, they dropped weapons so that the people could defend themselves. It was not, in the French explanation, part of a push towards Tripoli.

The UN resolution authorizes member states to take all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack. So what the French did is legal. However, there are political sensitivities. The French haven't publicized what they did because of Russian and Chinese and possibly Arab League sensitivities.

The French action is not precluded in the UN resolution but it might have been wiser for the French forces to act in concert with NATO, not to act on their own. Keep in mind, though, that France acted on its own in bombing Gadhafi forces outside of Benghazi on the very first day of this campaign, and they were right to do so; what they have just done in supplying arms is less significant.

THE REBELLION AGAINST THE GADHAFI'S REGIME HAS MADE SLOW PROGRESS SINCE NATO-LED COUNTRIES BEGAN BOMBING THREE MONTHS AGO, BUT REBELS SAY THEY ARE FINALLY ADVANCING CLOSER TO TRIPOLI. IN YOUR OPINION, HOW WILL THIS PLAY OUT?

Well, I don't know. If Gadhafi slept in the wrong place one night, the conflict could be over the next morning. Without Gadhafi everything would fall apart. He is a psychopath and few would mourn his passing

From NATO's perspective, Gadhafi's death would be the best-case scenario because he is the author of the threat to civilians. The worst-case scenario would be his gaining the upper hand and slaughtering people en masse.

There are scenarios between all and nothing at all. It's clear that some Libyans support Gadhafi while others oppose him. So, a possible alternative would be an armistice that divides the country on regional lines. In the past Libya was

divided into provinces. That kind of outcome, as part of an armistice could prevent a lot of deaths.

HOW WILL EVENTS IN LIBYA AFFECT ARAB SPRING OVERALL?

The difference between Tunisia and Egypt, on the one hand, and Libya and Syria on the other, is that the armies of the former states would not open fire on the civilian population. Western intervention in Libya has been helpful because it shows Arabs that the international community supports their efforts for modernity and democracy and that it won't stand by while autocratic leaders slaughter their own people. Syria's bad luck is that the Libyan conflict came first and there is a limit to how much public opinion, East and West, will tolerate serial wars.

Still, not being able to do everything at once is not an excuse for doing nothing. If Western governments had stood by while Gadhafi killed his own people, the Arab Spring might have ground to a halt.

Supporting the Arab Spring serves a strategic purpose for the West. The establishment of democracies, or at least more liberal democratizing government systems, throughout the region is beneficial because it creates more "dynamic stability" and in the process increases opportunity for young people in those countries, making them less vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations. When one's future depends exclusively on how connected one's family is to the elites, injustices abound and political instability follows

THE RECENT ATTACK ON THE INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL IN KABUL WILL NOT PREVENT THE IMMINENT DEPARTURE OF US AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF) TROOPS. SHOULD WESTERN LEADERS RECONSIDER?

That attack doesn't constitute a setback sufficient enough to call into question the timelines of the withdrawal of Western troops. In a situation such as the one in Afghanistan, there are always going to be attacks. You can't make every place secure all of the time, not even the capital. All you can do is train local authorities to do the best job they can in preventing and responding to attacks. Some observers say the fact that NATO forces ended the Intercontinental Hotel attack shows Afghan forces are not equipped to do that on their own. In fact, Afghan forces could have brought the attack to an end also. It just would have been more drawn out and probably more bloody.

GIVEN THE NATURE OF THE CURRENT AFGHAN LEADERSHIP, WHAT THE LONG-TERM PROSPECTS FOR AFGHANISTAN?

Well, the situation could be worse. Afghanistan has a parliament and a constitution. Many more children are going to school. The army is able to ensure some security. All of that is progress, to an extent. However, I am not going to paint a rosy picture. Afghanistan is a very poor country, one of the least developed, least literate, on earth. Corruption seems endemic. Governance is weak. It's going to be a long time before Afghans will lead the kind of peaceful and prosperous lives their counterparts in even many of the poorer countries of the world enjoy.