

PolicyWatch #1765

## Slippery Slope: Libya and the Lessons of Previous No-Fly Zones

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In [PolicyWatch #1763](#), Jason Hanover and Jeffrey White outlined the range of military options that the United States could employ to protect the Libyan population from the Qadhafi regime's military forces. The following article specifies the challenges posed by the enforcement of no-fly zones and related no-drive zones, drawing on lessons from such operations in the 1990s.

Twenty years ago, at the close of the 1991 Gulf War, the imposition of a UN-mandated no-fly zone contributed to the formation of a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds, resulting in the liberation of nearly three million people from Baathist dictatorship a full decade before the rest of Iraq. In 1992, new UN-mandated no-fly and no-drive zones were established in southern Iraq and the Balkans to contain rogue regimes and protect civilians from government repression. Given the current developments in Libya, it is natural to consider employing such options once again. Yet history shows that exclusion zones are particularly tricky operations. If not configured properly, they can be worse than useless, signaling fecklessness instead of resolve while providing little real protective value to civilians.

### Past Successes and Failures

During the Iraqi intifada that followed the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein's regime briefly lost control over fourteen of the country's eighteen provinces. Although the ceasefire signed between Baghdad and the U.S.-led coalition at Safwan specified the grounding of all Iraqi fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters were exempted and proved critical to the regime's efforts to quash the intifada and regain control. A coalition ban on helicopter operations and restrictions on the large-scale movement of ground forces would arguably have brought down the regime and saved much of the widespread suffering caused by the brutal crackdown. Indeed, the coalition's failure to support the intifada has never been forgotten or forgiven in some parts of southern Iraq.

On April 5, 1991, several coalition partners pushed through ratification of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 688, which demanded that Baghdad end its repression of the Kurds and initiated an international relief operation in Iraqi Kurdistan. It also underwrote a U.S.-led no-fly zone covering all Iraqi air assets (fixed-wing and rotary) above the thirty-sixth parallel, plus an exclusion zone to deter or reduce ground incursions or artillery attacks into the Kurdish safe havens. Dubbed "Operation Provide Comfort," the mission involved not only allied air forces, but also a brigade-sized deployment of U.S. ground forces in northern Iraq for four months and a Special Forces presence thereafter. In combination with military efforts by the Kurdish *peshmerga*, the operation resulted in the withdrawal of Iraqi forces behind a fortified line in October 1991.

Corresponding efforts covering southern Iraq did not occur until August 26, 1992, when the coalition used Resolution 688 to declare a no-fly zone covering all Iraqi air assets below the thirty-third parallel. The driving factor behind this decision was Saddam's resumption of attacks against Shiite villages using fixed-wing aircraft. The zone never truly protected civilians in the south, however, because the regime's ground forces were still capable of destroying communities with artillery and other means. As one Shiite Iraqi told *Time* magazine on March 29, 1993, "When we saw the allied jets ignore the guns that were killing us and hit only the missiles that threatened their planes last year, we knew we had been abandoned."

On October 15, 1994, UNSC Resolution 949 imposed a no-drive zone that forbade Iraqi military enhancements south of the thirty-third parallel. Yet this was a response to Saddam's threatened reinvasion of Kuwait, not a mechanism to protect Iraqi civilians. Similarly, no-fly zone operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995 struggled to protect civilians against repression and functioned primarily as a means to demonstrate resolve and build consensus for future military operations.

### **Limitations on No-Fly Zones**

The success of the no-fly zone over northern Iraq would seem to recommend the same course of action in current cases such as Libya, where a tottering regime might still be able to lash out at rebel enclaves and cause significant humanitarian suffering. The differences between Iraq in 1991 and Libya today are obvious, however.

First, Saddam's regime had just fought a major war with U.S.-led forces, while rapprochement has been the focus of recent U.S.-Libyan relations. Within the context of antigovernment uprisings, no-fly zones effectively transform the foreign power into a combatant -- presenting them as purely humanitarian in nature stretches credibility. Accordingly, such zones are best used as a means of curtailing the sovereignty of a regime with which the United States already has quasi-warlike relations.

Furthermore, U.S. military forces in the south were still occupying approximately one-eighth of Iraqi territory when the northern no-fly zone was established, and the establishment of Kurdish safe havens required further deployment of significant U.S. and coalition ground forces to deter regime incursions. Such ground deployments in Libya are probably not on the table. Most important, the United States could draw on strongly worded UN resolutions to underwrite its actions in 1991, whereas no such body of documents is available for use today.

In addition to being highly context-specific, no-fly and no-drive zones are notoriously difficult to implement. The rules of engagement (ROE) governing the mission must be exceptionally well conceived, and the military commanders must receive strong political support when they act within the rules. Any set of ROE must include a list of offending actions (known as the "ROE trip," short for "tripwire") plus "response options" (a set of pre-agreed retaliatory targets) and a "response ratio" (which establishes how vigorously the offender will be punished for transgressing the zone). U.S. forces needed twelve years of no-fly zone patrolling in Iraq to perfect the system, and even then the zones generated controversy because they often required relatively junior officers to use their initiative in interpreting the ROE.

In general, an aggressive opponent -- such as Saddam and, perhaps, the Qadhafi regime -- will regularly test the ROE, and the patrolling power may need to retaliate disproportionately to deter proscribed actions, including attacks on civilians and rebel forces. Any ROE, particularly those governing no-drive zones, may be prone to uncontrolled escalation, drawing the patrolling power into more significant military operations than initially intended. Collateral damage among civilian and friendly forces is always a risk, as occurred on April 14, 1994, when two U.S. helicopters were destroyed by other U.S. aircraft in the northern no-fly zone, killing twenty-six coalition and Iraqi personnel.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

The Iraqi situation in 1991 seems to point to the potential utility of no-fly and no-drive zones in Libya today. Twenty years ago this week, such zones might have tipped the balance of Iraq's intifada, toppled an unpopular regime, prevented great suffering, and earned Iraqi gratitude toward the United States. And in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, Western air and ground exclusion zones clearly mitigated a humanitarian disaster.

Yet history also shows that imposing no-fly zones is a slippery slope: such missions are easy to begin but exceedingly difficult to end. If a zone is established in Libya to protect a rebel enclave but the Qadhafi regime survives, the United States would need to be careful not to inherit the open-ended protection of a new

ministate.

The no-fly zones of the 1990s provide a bevy of practical lessons for planners weighing the advantages and disadvantages of such operations today:

- Seek out a clear mandate from the UN Security Council, which provided the foundation for previous no-fly zones.
- Make the prohibitions mandated by no-fly and no-drive zones as clear as possible, banning the movement and use of all recognizable military forces within defined geographic zones. Do not exempt any forms of fixed-wing or helicopter assets, nor artillery. For example, UNSC Resolution 816 banned all civil and military air transportation in Bosnia-Herzegovina not expressly authorized by UN air traffic controllers, reducing potential loopholes and the risk of collateral damage. Planners should also draw the zone boundaries in relation to real-world social, tribal, or geographic fracture lines rather than arbitrary features such as latitude or longitude lines.
- To provide a way out of an open-ended commitment, seek a UN resolution that requires renewal within a specified time limit.

If the United States and its allies decide to pursue exclusion zones in Libya, these and other lessons can increase the chance that military options offer a credible and controllable means to protect civilians from repression.

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