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Should we arm the rebels?

Aim:

- To consider the question of becoming involved in conflict

Introduction

Protests in Libya

In January 2011 there was significant popular protest on the streets of Cairo and other large Egyptian cities. Though President Mubarak attempted to use force to stop this he was largely unsuccessful and eventually resigned. Political reforms moving the country towards democracy started. In February the Libyans began a series of protests with the aim of attempting a popular uprising to remove Colonel Gaddafi from his 42 year rule. He was having none of this and although some of his army, in the east of the country, joined a rebel movement he started to put down the uprising using force. The majority of the uprising consisted of civilians protesting with military force being used against them. Colonel Gaddafi has an army, an air force and a navy. It was these military personnel that he turned onto his own people.



Gaddafi at the 12th African Union summit in Addis Ababa. (2009)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muammar_Gaddafi

The UK said that it was wrong. Italy, France and most of the EU said it was wrong. The US condemned it and told him to stop.

Sanctions were applied; buying and selling of goods with Libya was declared illegal by the United Nations and most countries stopped trading with Libya. 80% of the Libyan government's income (which Colonel Gaddafi controls) comes from the sale of oil to the rest of the world.

Gaddafi then started to use his air force to bomb the rebels. He was tentative at first, wondering what the reaction of the rest of the world might be to him bombing his own people. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) spoke of imposing a no-fly zone over Libya to halt this bombing. Before this was put in place, Gaddafi's air force became more emboldened, flying more missions and creating more deaths and fear. When NATO imposed a no fly zone they bombed a number of Colonel Gaddafi's air bases and drastically reduced his ability to use air power.

Now the struggle is a land based one, between an army with regular professional soldiers and an array of civilians, some soldiers and the weaponry in army bases in the east of the country. It is a deadly game of push forward, take ground, get pushed back. Both sides pushing and shoving. To stop more people being killed the UK the US and the rest of NATO are talking of supplying arms to the rebels to overthrow Colonel Gaddafi more rapidly.

Should we arm the rebels – provide them with weapons and ammunition?



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Looking Deeper

Getting involved

On the surface it looks like a David and Goliath situation, with Colonel Gadaffi playing the role of Goliath. However it is never that simple, and there is some history to consider.

On 21st December 1988 Pan Am flight 103 was going to the US with 243 passengers and 16 crew, most were Americans returning home for Christmas celebrations. At about 7-02pm a bomb went off on the plane at 31,000 feet. None of them stood a chance. The debris and fuel which fell out of the sky, raining fire and destruction on the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killed 11 people on the ground. At the time it was suspected that Libya and Colonel Gadaffi were behind the atrocity, and in 2003 he admitted it. After his admission he was welcomed back into the international community.

There is evidence that he has silenced, by various means, any form of dissent in the country. The state owned media are very tightly controlled so that only the story according to Colonel Gadaffi is broadcast.

In the past he has been antagonistic towards the UK and the west in general.

The UK and US governments would be happy to see him replaced with a more western friendly democratically elected government. Some of the Libyan people would be happy to see him replaced and there are others around the world who want to see a change of Government in Libya.

So, who are the rebels? The government isn't sure beyond there are a number of different groups who see a gain in sticking together to over throw Colonel Gadaffi.

They all want the overthrow of the dictator who runs Libya. But after an overthrow, will they still all want the same? It's difficult to tell. Some want a stable democratic western-looking country. Some want to settle old scores. Some are content to see Libya descend into anarchy and exploit a weak country such as Somalia. Some would like to form an Islamic state, others would like to get their hand on the oil revenues.

No one is clear what could happen if they overthrow Gadaffi. We don't know if the rebel leaders will be able to control all the factions who helped in the struggle.

We don't know if there will be infighting to sort out who has the power.

So, why might we want to support them?

- Maybe to ensure as few deaths as possible
- Maybe to secure stable oil supplies to the west
- Maybe to settle old scores

One thing is clear, if we supply arms to the rebels, more innocent civilians will be killed.



The biblical story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel:17) is a good parallel. It tells of a huge fighting warrior as the champion of the Philistine army being pitted against a lowly small shepherd boy called David. We know what happened because the Bible tells us that David used his sling shot to hurl a stone which hit Goliath on the head and killed him.



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The Philistine army broke up and fled.
But who supplied the stone for David's sling shot?

Should we send arms to the Libyan rebels in the certain knowledge that more innocent people will be killed?

Should we ignore it and say, 'It's not my problem'?

Should we go into Libya with troops, throw Colonel Gadaffi out and leave a power vacuum?

What should we do?

What is our foreign policy?

Jesus teaches about forgiveness and loving your enemies. But for some people that is difficult. When Christians practice what Jesus tells them about loving their enemies and forgiving wrong-doing, some people find that hard to understand and thinks it is soft. Should we love all the Libyan people the same?

What would you do?

Reflection

Do the ends justify the means?

Prayer

Father God, speak to the hearts of our leaders as they decide how to respond to the current situation in Libya. Ensure that they take decisions based on the well-being of the Libyan people and not on settling old scores. Amen

Thought for the day

All that is required for evil to prosper is for good people to do nothing.

Key words

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