

WE FAILED THE LIBYANS

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The Toronto Star, [Editorial](#), 16 March 2011

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Terrified residents dread the onslaught of Gadhafi's warplanes, missiles, tanks and artillery, all of which the despot has turned on civilians, calling his foes "rats," as Star writer Mitch Potter reports. The democratic world's response? Finger-wagging, chiefly.

Averse to making war on an Arab state after the Iraq fiasco, the United States, Canada and the Group of Eight collectively have shrugged off desperate pleas from Benghazi and the Arab League for a no-fly zone, and punted the crisis up to the United Nations Security Council. The G8's demand Tuesday that Gadhafi "leave" or face "dire consequences" was a shabby, hollow threat.

The Security Council has asked the International Criminal Court to investigate Gadhafi's crimes, and has imposed sanctions and an arms embargo. But weeks ago, the Star argued that the UN should authorize efforts to disrupt his military, enforce a no-fly zone and mobilize relief to the rebel areas, if he made good on his threat to turn Libya into "a hell" to stay in power. That intervention, which might have made a difference, never came.

While the UN still can and should protect civilians in Benghazi, Tobruk and other areas by declaring them "safe zones" and off-limits to Gadhafi's war machine, the damage already has been done.

Daring reformers chalked up amazing victories in neighbouring Egypt, the most populous Arab country, and in Tunisia. But Gadhafi's bloody reaction, his readiness to spill civilian blood and the growing pushback by other Arab autocrats, raises the question of whether the Arab Awakening of 2011 may come to mirror the ill-fated liberal revolutions in Europe in 1848.

European reformers shook the imperial capitals of Paris, Berlin and Vienna, and wrung concessions similar to those Arab reformers seek today, including constitutional change, universal suffrage, and freedom of the press and of assembly. But their gains proved short-lived. The monarchists got over their initial shock, rallied, crushed the liberals, reinstated monarchies and rolled back many of the gains.

Of course, the upheaval of 1848 inspired a reform spirit that never died. The Arab Awakening may have the same long-term effect.

But this is a tragic moment for Libya's reformers, abandoned by those who once cheered them on.

