It’s not too late for an Arab League-led effort to impose a no-flight zone.

**What Can Arab Leaders Do About Libya?**

They may want to oust Muammar el-Qaddafi, but do they really want American or NATO military intervention?

**Arab Militaries Can Take the Lead**

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In mid-February, in a meeting with high-ranking U.S. officials, I suggested that the best course of action regarding the Libyan situation would be for the Arab League to spearhead an international effort to establish a no-flight zone over Libya as part of a broader strategy to support the Libyan population and hold the Qaddafi regime accountable for its actions.

At the time, the Arab League had just suspended Libya’s membership and Colonel Qaddafi’s forces had begun using military aircraft to attack civilian populations and the opposition. On March 12, the Arab League did just this, calling on the U.N. Security Council to impose a no-fly zone “to protect Libyan citizens.”

It is difficult to underestimate the significance of the Arab League’s recent actions. This club of dictatorships has historically shown little commitment to human rights, democracy, or political freedoms and has been characterized by impotence, irrelevance, and bickering among member states.

The fact that the Arab League voted to suspend Libya’s membership, requested a no-flight zone, and finally, recognized the Libyan opposition as the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people, reflects the widespread sentiment in the Arab world about the character of Qaddafi’s regime.

It is still not too late to impose a no-flight zone over Libya with or without consensus in the Security Council, as long as it is an Arab League-led initiative. In fact, for a no-flight zone to be both legitimate and successful politically and militarily, it must be an Arab-led operation. An exclusively American or NATO effort would be viewed with suspicion or rejected by many in the region.

In addition to the Arab League, Britain and France already support the no-flight zone proposal, and the U.S. should also support the initiative. Several Arab states have pledged their active participation in such an effort, according to news reports. And there are several Arab militaries that have the aircraft, the skilled pilots, and potentially the will, to undertake such a mission.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia could lead such efforts, with the military and logistical support of a coalition that included the U.S., Britain, France and other countries. The Egyptian air force alone has over 100 F-16 fighters in addition to well-trained pilots. Saudi Arabia, which is no friend to Qaddafi, also boasts over 100 F-15s. And although much smaller, the Tunisian military and the Tunisian people fully support the Libyan opposition.

Such forces, with the help of an international coalition, could easily handle Libya’s tiny fleet of Mirage fighters and largely outdated Russian MiGS. Moreover, the simple announcement of a no-flight zone would act as a tremendous disincentive for any Libyan pilot to take to the skies and risk being shot down by coalition forces.

The risks of taking no action are too high. If Qaddafi captures Benghazi and other cities presently held by the opposition, there will be reprisals and massive revenge killings by his forces. The crushing of the Libyan revolution and the survival of one of the most brutal regimes in the region would also be a major setback for the development of democracy in neighboring states (i.e., Tunisia and Egypt) and the rest of the Arab world. While a no-flight zone is not a complete
answer, it would reduce the ability of a ruthless thug from killing even larger numbers of Libyans fighting for their freedom.

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