

# NATO's Intervention in Libya: Assessment and Implications

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NATO's intervention in Libya has raised much controversy and been subject to opposite assessments. While many analysts, and NATO itself, refer to Operation Unified Protector in Libya as an undeniable success and even a template for future NATO operations, others accuse the Alliance of stretching its United Nations mandate in favour of a preset goal aimed at regime change. Moreover, assessing NATO's effective engagement in Libya has inevitably triggered comparisons with the parallel case of Syria, which involves a similar humanitarian disaster but has triggered less international and regional enthusiasm for intervention. Importantly, further criticism blames NATO's operation for the current state of chaos and insecurity in post-Gaddafi Libya. However, one should be careful when assessing NATO's operation in a manner that balances the successful military operation with the naturally predictable need to act in post-Gaddafi Libya. The following lines attempt to provide an assessment of the intervention in Libya and to sensibly consider its implications for the current and future security situation in the Mediterranean.

## **A Success Story**

When NATO took over the operation in Libya on 27 March 2011, a perfect legal and political context was in place. The pillars of this ideal context were threefold. First, an internationally recognised humanitarian disaster was unfolding in which former Libyan

President Muammar Gaddafi was launching a brutal onslaught against Libyan protestors. Crucially, this disaster was taking place in a unique political context, represented by the public revolts sweeping the Arab region against what had long been perceived to be unshakable dictatorships. Second, the Arab League, which by then had already suspended Libya's membership, issued an unprecedented call asking the international community to intervene to protect the Libyan people. Third, UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorised Member States, acting nationally or through regional organisations, "to take all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat." The resolution provided for the protection of civilians, the imposition of a no-fly zone, enforcement of an arms embargo, a ban on flights, and the freezing of assets. Over and above this perfect context, the decision of four Arab partner countries, namely, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates, to join NATO's efforts in Libya, as well as the decision of the United States not to take the lead, added much to the broader perception of the legitimacy of the intervention.

Throughout Operation Unified Protector, NATO appeared keen to work on its image crisis and polish its reputation in the Arab region, where it has been forging two forums for dialogue and partnerships: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) with North African countries since 1994 and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) with the Gulf States since 2004. It was, hence, eager to pull out of Libya as soon as the Libyan opposition, represented by the National Transitional Council, had taken control of the country and once the protestors had captured and killed Gaddafi. Even if the operation was not a fast one, the facts that it saved tens of thousands of civilian lives, immediately terminated after achieving its objectives, had a relatively low cost compared to previous operations, and did not lead to a single casualty on

NATO's side are all plausible reasons to judge it to have been a success.

### **Despite the Criticism, A Success Nonetheless!**

In contrast with this outlook, NATO's intervention in Libya has also received heavy criticism, including charges that the Alliance intentionally expanded its UN mandate, siding with the Libyan protestors with the aim of achieving regime change rather than merely protecting civilians. African leaders, especially, have been particularly loud in accusing NATO of completely disregarding the African Union Road Map for Libya with this aim. Many observers have gone further still and blamed NATO's intervention for the now torn Libya and the fact that it remains trapped in unceasing violence. However, it must be stressed that those who accuse NATO of mission-creep aimed at regime change are ignoring the key, unconcealed fact that the Libyan people themselves demanded regime change and that the Libyan National Transitional Council itself did not accept the African Union's Road Map. The public uprising sparked in Libya on 17 February, following the success of similar uprisings in Tunisia and in Egypt to topple Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's and Hosni Mubarak's regimes respectively, aimed to topple Gaddafi's regime. In response, Gaddafi brutally fought the Libyan people, including with the help of mercenaries from a number of friendly African countries. Thus, were it not for NATO's intervention, Libya would most likely still be undergoing even more violent scenarios comparable to the parallel case of Syria.

### **The Inevitable Comparisons with Syria**

The parallel case of Syria, where Bashar al-Assad has also been fighting anti-regime protestors, is inevitably compared to Libya. Critics are further questioning why the international community responded briskly and forcefully in oil-rich Libya but has failed to take a similar attitude towards Syria.

There is no doubt that international intervention for humanitarian reasons has often been selective, and international history stands as a trusted witness. The perplexing silence that prevailed regionally and internationally and met the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council's campaign to crack down on the public up-

rising in Bahrain is a recent and relevant example. There is likewise no doubt that European countries, in particular, have more direct interests in Libya than in Syria. Gaddafi's Libya long enjoyed a geostrategic and political significance among European powers, especially Italy, not only for its oil resources but also for its commitment and efforts to restrain illegal migration. In addition, Libya's geographical proximity to Europe and its central location on the southern Mediterranean shore in an area relatively free of regional political complications compared to Syria were also factors that positively influenced military calculations regarding the potential for success of an operation in Libya.

Nonetheless, to be fair and balanced, the ideal conditions for intervention fulfilled in the case of Libya seem to be lacking in the case of Syria. With the exception of the equally recognised humanitarian disaster in Syria, there is no UN Security Council resolution for Syria – and it was Russia and China who blocked it, not European powers or the United States – and there is no similar call from the Arab League for intervention.

### **Implications of NATO's Operation for Mediterranean Security**

Despite its success, NATO's operation in Libya elicits many reflections and has several implications for the current and future security situation in the Mediterranean. One reflection regards the future role of Europe in Mediterranean security in light of the general impression that European powers took the lead in NATO's operation. A second reflection regards the implications of what seems to be unfinished business in Libya, due to the continued violence in the country and the apparent lack of stability.

#### *Europe Takes the Lead?*

One of the most important issues in the experience of NATO's engagement in Libya is the unexpected contribution of European powers compared to what was labelled the "supporting role" of the United States. Particularly, the high-profile roles of Britain and France stimulated an international perception of Europe taking the lead in a NATO operation in the Mediterranean. Critically, the Mediterranean is an area that is actually home to a high level of competition between NATO and the EU and one that Euro-

peans deem more relevant to their security, political, and economic interests than do their allies on the other side of the Atlantic.

## The EU should work earnestly to unify the voices of its Member States and to turn its promises into actions in its Southern neighbourhood

Several facts suggest that the role of the United States was not really marginal and that Europe was significantly divided over Libya. First, the United States provided critical military assistance, including 97% of the Tomahawk missiles used to attack Libyan air defences at the start of the operation and 75% of the aerial refuelling used throughout the operation. It also intervened to sell NATO critical equipment after the latter ran out of precision-guided bombs, supplied NATO with key targeting and intelligence assets, such as unmanned drones, and offered it expertise when it became disappointingly clear that its European allies lacked the required know-how to provide their aircraft with proper targeting information and the US commanders in Europe dispatched around 100 military personnel to the NATO Targeting Centre. It was indeed embarrassing for Europe when NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that “the operation has made visible that the Europeans lack a number of essential military capabilities.” Second, the futile struggle for consensus among EU capitals on how to react to the situation in Libya greatly undermined the actual existence of a Common European Foreign and Security Policy.

Yet despite these facts, one important outcome of Operation Unified Protector is that European powers – albeit through NATO rather than the EU – effectively took the lead in Libya. The implications of this are mainly threefold. First, Europe will have to seriously consider enhancing its military capabilities if it earnestly wishes to provide for its own security. This will entail a serious reconsideration of Member States’ budget allocations for defence and a review of the cuts that many have undertaken to date. Second, Europe cannot adopt a “wait and see” or cautious approach towards revolutionary events in the Mediterranean. The EU should instead work ear-

nestly to unify the voices of its Member States and to turn its promises into actions in its Southern neighbourhood. That will necessitate a serious effort to revitalise the weak new European Neighbourhood Policy launched by the EU in May 2011, alleged to represent a fundamental review of its traditionally ill-thought-out democracy promotion policy in the Arab region. Third, the EU, and particularly those Member States that enthusiastically contributed to NATO’s operation in Libya, must be aware of the responsibility that lies on their shoulders for what seems to be unfinished business in the country.

### *Unfinished Business: The Responsibility to Help a still Fragile and Unstable Country*

Indeed, NATO’s military operation in Libya was a success insofar as it achieved its goals. It was also a success in terms of its accomplishments in light of NATO’s focal expertise and comparative advantage in *military* operations. However, the fact that NATO’s operation cannot be blamed for the chaos, insecurity and fragility of post-Gaddafi Libya – all expected outcomes in a country in transition with its specific demographic characteristics and political culture, weak institutions, and long history of misrule and repression – does not negate the equal reality that the international community in general, and those powers that intervened in Libya in particular, still have a moral responsibility to help Libya with its transition to a better future. In pragmatic terms, not only is there a moral obligation, but, more importantly, it is in Europe’s best interests to have a stable and more democratic Libya on the other shore of the Mediterranean. In addition, Europe, which took the lead in NATO’s military operation, should be most concerned with helping Libya so as to prevent troubled internal dynamics in the country from poisoning the operation’s success.

In practical terms, the EU enjoys a comparative advantage over NATO in post-conflict reconstruction and in managing civil-military relations. The distinguished expertise of the EU in these policy areas, accumulated and refined in several rule-of-law missions and civilian operations worldwide, is apt to be put to use in post-Gaddafi Libya. Furthermore, it would notably enhance Europe’s profile in the region if the EU could work as a catalyst for a concerted international effort, with significant contributions from Arab and African countries and organisations, aimed at assisting the Libyan transition.