CRISIS IN LIBYA: FROM POLITICAL AND MILITARY INTERVENTION TO CIVIL WAR

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INTRODUCTION

After 42 years of dictatorship, Libya was swept away by the revolutionary movement of the Arab Spring. When its dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, used rhetoric of violent repression[1] against any political reform and turned the military against its political opponents, a potential genocide was in the making. As Gaddafi's forces marched onto Benghazi, historical resolutions 1970 (2011)[2] and 1973 (2011)[3] came into play; the United Nation Security Council (UN SC) decided to up-hold to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and a coalition intervened in Libya by force to protect the civilian population from its government. The international intervention was strongly influenced and conducted by Western countries with the significant contribution from their regional partners.[4] The enthusiasms following the Gaddafi regime's defeat was soon replaced by the despair of civil war and continued suffering of the population as the National Transitional Council (NTC) and its successors failed to take control over the various rebel militias. Although events in Libya have receded from the main stage or media coverage, regular news reports of refugees in make-shift boats drowning in the Mediterranean Sea as they attempt to flee violence in North Africa are a constant reminder of the dire situation in Libya.

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[1] Domansky, Katie, Jensen, Rebecca, Bryson, Rachael. "Canada and the Libya Coalition." In *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* Volume 14, Issues 3&4 (2012). p. 2-3.

[2] UN Security Council Resolution 1970 (26 February, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1970.

[3] UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1973.

[4] Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, Pouliot, Vincent. "Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya." In *European Journal of International Relations* Volume 20(4) (2014). P. 898-899. p. 901.

The 2011 intervention in Libya, particularly the military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have been both criticized and praised. Although the political transition in Libya remains an unfolding story, there is sufficient information to assess the international community's response and military intervention in Libya in 2011 for successes and failures, both from political and military perspectives. To do so, it is important to first understand the context in which these interventions took place and their objectives, again both political and military.

BACKGROUND

The revolutionary movement in Libya was centered in the East, in Benghazi, and rose initially from the secular middle class.[5] Those involved in the movement were not confined to members of a particular political party or religious group. Their demands were secular: social and economic justice, end of corruption, political freedom without fear of repression and dignity.[6] They were led mostly by previously disabused members of the Gaddafi government who had defected and long-time opponents of the regime. The militias were made up of defecting soldiers, the youth and the poorest citizens. This coalition of diverse groups was mobilized and held together by their common demands[7] and by their determination to oust their long-term, repressive dictator.[8]

The struggles for political reform during the course of the revolution were very complex. Despite common goals, visions for Libya's future differed greatly. The quick

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[5] Danahar, Paul. "The Collapse of the Old Middle East." In *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. p. 24.

[6] Corm, Georges. "Les révoltes arabes : libération ou chaos ?" In *Le Proche-Orient éclaté, 1956-2012, tome II*. Paris: Gallimard, 2012. p. 1127.

[7] Brynen, Rex, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar. "Political Culture Revisited." In *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*. Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2012. p. 111.

[8] Danahar, p. 29.

pace at which the revolution came together, typical of the Arab Spring, coupled with the urgency of defeating the threat posed by Gaddafi's forces, meant that plans for political considerations post-Gaddafi were only partially considered; nothing was firmly agreed upon amongst the rebel leaders. Libya was also deficient in national institutions. When Gaddafi took power, he dismantled many institutions[9] leaving weak national institutions and government structures.[10] "Gaddafi practically 'vandalized' Libya's social and political fabric, manipulating tribe … to divide and rule."[11] He controlled the country by rewarding his supporters, using wealth from the lucrative oil industry while dealing with brutality to any opposition to assert his power. As successful democracy requires strong national institutions, the revolution was facing an uphill battle.

As protests began in February 2011, Gaddafi and his regime vehemently opposed any political reforms. His violent rhetoric to "cleanse Libya [of those who oppose him] inch by inch, house by house, home by home, alleyway by alleyway, person by person, until the country is cleansed of dirt and scum"[12] and brutal crackdown (sending air and ground forces[13] as well as mercenaries[14] against Benghazi to swiftly obliterate its opponents) left little time for the international community to react. As a consensus was forming among regional organizations[15] and the international community that bloodshed

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[9] Bishku, Michael B. "Is it an Arab Spring or Business as Usual? Recent Changes in the Arab World in Historical Context." *Journal of Third World Studies* 30, no. 1 (2013). p. 59.
[10] Bishku, p. 66.
[11] Sadiki, Larbi. "Libya's Arab Spring: The Long Road from Revolution to Democracy." In *International Studies* 49(3&4) (2012): 285-314. p. 297.
[12] Bartu, Peter. "Libya's Political Transition: The Challenges of Mediation." New York: *International Peace Institute* (December 2014). p. 1.
[13] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 2.
[14] Bishku, p. 67.
[15] Bartu, p. 2.

was imminent, various proposals were pushed forward to avert a humanitarian crisis and potential genocide.

POLITICAL

The obvious political objective was a peaceful negotiated settlement, but with little time to spare before the worst could occur and with the parties having seemingly irreconcilable positions, this seemed unlikely. The UN and the African Union (AU) both conducted uncoordinated attempts to negotiation; however, the circumstances and more forceful actions by others did not leave them any serious chance of success.[16] A complicated game of internal and external factors was at play[17]; the various stakeholders in the international community each had their own geopolitical interests in the unfolding Arab Spring.

Libya's Internal Struggle

From this early hope of political reform and democratization, Libya is now a failed state in the mist of civil war. To understand how political transition failed, an appreciation for the internal struggles Libyan leaders were facing is required. As discussed earlier, the opposition to Gaddafi and his removal is what held together the various rebel factions. After his death, the rebels turned on each other, although, the struggle for unity had been on-going in the background for quite some time. The "rancorous debates over the nature of the transition"[18] were setting the tone for the political transition process and shaping the future political structure and Libya's constitution.

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[16] Dewaal, Alex, "The African Union and the Libya Conflict of 2011", *World Peace Foundation – Reinventing Peace* (blog), December 19, 2012.
[17] Corm, p. 1126.
[18] Bartu, p. 8-9.

The UN and the West were more favourable to a slower and stable process, of delaying the election until national institutions could be built up and political parties were able to organize. For the West, difficulties caused by the rapid election in Iraq were still fresh in the memory and a slower approach was perceived as more favourable to secular and stable political reforms. This approach was supported in the NTC by the NTC chief of the executive, Mahmud Jibril. Favouring the opposite approach, the Islamist movement wanted a rapid election; they expected success as they were better organized and already had a strong support base.

In August, in a move to ensure the Islamists would have their way, the NTC Chair, Abd al-Jabil, fired the entire NTC chief executive[19] leaving the revolution without a government ahead of the capture of the capital, Tripoli. As the various rebel militias were taking control of the country, Libya was left in a precarious situation: little to no institutions, no government, divided factions, and the tribal aspect adding to the complexity of the political landscape.[20] Furthermore, after the revolution 200,000 well-armed militias (not under the control of the transitional government) were creating security problems, such as the famous attack on Tripoli's airport; Libya's military existed mostly on paper.[21] Violence by armed groups had become routine, it seemed, as a struggle to erase Gaddafi's legacy by liberating Libya from those associated with the repressive regime[22] and a levelling of the political playing field for those long silenced was underway.[23] New laws on political parties barred parties from having militias[24] in an

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[19] Bartu, p. 9.
[20] Sadiki, p. 311.
[21] Bishku, p. 67.
[22] Bartu, p. 9.
[23] Sadiki, p. 312.
[24] Ibid p. 308.

attempt to curtail the role of militias in the new political arena. However, laws must be enforced to have meaning and influence; this was not the case.

Despite these significant issues, the elections for a transitional governing body were held in July 2012 with large voter participation – although not without irregularities. The General National Congress (GNC) replaced the NTC with a two year mandate to form an elected transitional government and appoint the assembly charged to develop a constitution[25] in preparation for the election of a Council of Deputies as the future governing body in Libya. The 2014 election for the Council of Deputies saw a low participation rate,[26] reducing its legitimacy. In the new government, which was recognized by many countries, the Islamist representation dropped drastically. What was left of the GNC? Islamists, not recognizing the legitimacy of the Council of Deputies maintained control over the Capital,[27] while the newly formed government was establishing itself in Tobruk. Both parties opted for military action over negotiated settlement; this resulted in civil war.

Regional Organizations

Over the years, Gaddafi had alienated many African and Arab leaders.[28] As discussed above, the AU attempted mediation. The aim was a deliberate approach to political transition, but in reality AU leaders were divided on the issue; many disliked Gaddafi and were already supporting his opponents.[29] In the end, the AU was ineffective in advancing meaningful negotiation and the mediation attempts failed. The Arab

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[25] Bartu, p. 11.
[26] Ibid p. 12.
[27] Bartu, p. 12.
[28] Bishku, p. 67.
[29] Dewaal.

countries and the Middle East reacted to Gaddafi's actions much more forcefully; their support and actions were instrumental in the passing of two UN SC resolutions. The Arab League suspended Libya from its session and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) pushed the UN SC for a no-fly zone over Libya (supported by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)). The way was paved for the second UN SC resolution which would lead to military intervention by coalition.

Western Interests

For Western countries, major issues were at play during the Arab Spring. The end of dictatorships provided a unique opportunity for liberalization and democracy in the region, but also uncertainties about the future of Western influence.[30] A genuine concern for human security motivated Western countries actions, from the raising of the R2P norm to the US adoption of the genocide and mass atrocity prevention/protection (GMAPP) policy.[31] However, less altruistic interests also motivated the Western intervention that led to the removal of Gaddafi. Here was an opportunity to topple a leader that Western countries feared and hated[32] despite recent improvement in the relationship between Gaddafi and the West. Europeans also wanted to protect their oil.[33] However, Libya's particular circumstances and Gaddafi's reputation only partially explain inconsistencies in Western policy during the Arab Spring. Western countries tolerated violence in some countries, such as Bahrain and Yemen, while denouncing the government in Syria and pushing for military intervention in Libya. Western interests in

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[30] Corm, p. 1126.
[31] Vaughn, Jocelyn, Dunne, Tim. In "Leading from the front: America, Libya and the localisation of R2P." In *Cooperation and Conflict* Volume 50(I) (2015). 29-49. P. 30.
[32] Danahar, p. 26.
[33] Bishku, p. 67.

the Persian Gulf and the dilemma between collective and human security are the other parts of this equation.

UN Security Council

For the UN SC, the crisis in Libya brought a historic response, when resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011) were passed in rapid succession, sanctioning military operations to enforce the R2P. UN SC rapid and powerful response did not happen without its challenges and controversies. As the UN Secretary-General mandated Abdelelah al-Khatib, Special Envoy for Libya[34] to attempt peaceful mediation, the Western influence in UN SC under the lead of British and French diplomats was pushing a different agenda. Convinced that only a rapid intervention could deter Gaddafi, they moved quickly to persuade the UN SC to pass Resolution 1970 (2011), which requested immediate end to violence, imposed an arms embargo, froze Libyan assets overseas, referred the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court (ICC), requested full access for humanitarian assistance and imposed a travel ban for Gaddafi, his family and key staff.[35]

The far reaching Resolution 1970 (2011) was passed unanimously by the UN SC with the support of defected Libyan diplomats and the diplomatic skills of French and British staff. However, as the resolution did not seem to deter Gaddafi and its regime, a second resolution to impose a no-fly zone was proposed by the Arab League. With the influence of the United States (US), the resolution included the clause authorizing "Member States … to take all necessary measures … to protect civilians and civilian

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[34] Bartu, p. 1.
[35] UN Security Council Resolution 1970 (26 February, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1970.

populated areas under threat of attack."[36] This surprising resolution, a first for the UN SC, did not pass without struggle. Skilful diplomatic engagement – in particular, by active Lebanese diplomats – and the support of regional organizations were greatly aided by Gaddafi's reputation. This combination eventually led to the un-opposed approval of the resolution, if only by a small margin. The interpretation by some Western countries and their regional partners of the clause that authorizes taking all necessary measures to protect civilians led to the controversial military intervention.

MILITARY

Despite the controversy, the military intervention played a significant role in the successful revolution against Gaddafi's regime.[37] Without rapid military intervention from the outside, the revolution would have had little chance to organize against the forces it was facing. The campaign likely saved tens of thousands of lives as Gaddafi's forces were marching on Benghazi.[38] Was it too much or too little in the light of the current Libyan struggles? That is open for debate. The success of military operations must be assessed not only against military objectives, but also how well the military operations support political strategic intent. So, let us look at the conduct of the military intervention and choices made by the coalition both early on, with the US-led "Operation ODYSSEY DAWN", and shortly thereafter, with NATO-led "Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR. This will help to better understand how military intervention positively or negatively impacted Libya's political transition.

Conduct of Operations

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[36] UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1973. Para 4.
[37] Sadiki, p.298.
[38] Bishku, p. 3.

From the coalition's interpretation of UN SC Resolution 1973 (2011), the clear

stated objective of the military intervention was to protect civilians and civilian populated

areas.[39] NATO measured the achievement of this objective against three goals: ending

attacks and threats against civilians, forcing the withdrawal of Gaddafi's forces, and

guaranteeing humanitarian access.[40] With Gaddafi's forces already in action and not

deterred by UN SC resolutions, the coalition wasted no time in conducting "an air

campaign of unparalleled precision"[41] that obliterated Libya's air defence systems within

72 hours.[42] It continued with a bombing campaign that slowly picked apart Gaddafi's

ground forces and enforced the embargo. The forceful removal of Gaddafi was not a

stated objective of the coalition; it was implied by de facto support of the rebels[43] for

which Gaddafi's removal was a non-negotiable element of political transition.

The revolution was given a chance to organize and strive; Gaddafi's control over

Libya was unravelling. Libya's military forces had no investment in either the state or the

regime. As the regime started to lose control, the military split apart; it was no longer

clear for whom they were fighting.[44] Tribal identity and alignment had been a dominant

factor of Libya internal politics; some stayed loyal to Gaddafi's regime, others defected.

When tribes began withdrawing their allegiance,[45] Gaddafi's fate was sealed. On 20

October 2011, he was captured and killed while retreating from his hometown of Sirte.

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[39] UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1973. Para. 4.
[40] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 24.
[41] Daalder, Ivo H., Stavridis, James G. "NATO's Victory in Lybia. The Right Way to Run an Intervention." In *Foreign Affairs* Volume 91 No.2 (March/April 2012). p. 3.
[42] Ibid p. 3.
[43] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 24.
[44] Danahar, p. 25-26.
[45] Sadiki, p. 297.

NATO terminated the mission 31 October 2011. They determined that Libyans were free of Gaddafi and able to protect themselves.[46]

Measure of Success

While it is undeniable that Gaddafi and his regime no longer pose a threat to the Libyan population and that coalition intervention saved lives in Benghazi in March 2011,[47] the overall success is questionable. The population in Benghazi are again suffering the assault of government forces. However, this time the government was elected and its legitimacy has been recognized on the international stage. So what were the successes and what were the shortcomings of the military intervention?

The rapidity with which the coalition came together following the UN SC resolution and delivered impressive air and naval capabilities can certainly be considered a success. For NATO, the casualty free operation[48] showcased the effectiveness of NATO common command structure and doctrine for the effective integration and C2 of allied partners.[49] The rapid and precise response placed Gaddafi's forces on the defensive and was ultimately essential in enabling the rebels' victory. Measuring against NATO's aforementioned stated goals, the operation was a rousing success. However, the intervention did show shortcomings within NATO (an issue beyond the scope of this paper). Not all members participated in the mission and only a small number of countries carried the burden of military operations.[50] This raises the question of future direction within NATO and involvement outside Europe. More importantly for this paper is

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[46] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 4.
[47] Daalder and Stavridis, p. 2.
[48] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 22.
[49] Daalder and Stavridis, p. 3-4.
[50] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 26.

continued political instability in Libya. If the military intervention was such a success while the security situation in Libya continues to deteriorate, what were the real political objectives and were the military objectives properly aligned?

While Gaddafi's nefarious reputation and the goal of his removal was holding together the rebels, it was also significantly motivating coalition members: Gaddafi had often opposed and frustrated them in the past. This raises the question of what happened regarding continued political support from the West to political reform once Gaddafi was removed. Certainly the West was highly favourable to democracy, but not to the point of committing peacekeeping or peacemaking forces, particularly after years of painful and messy experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Adding to the complexity of continued intervention were regional considerations. Regional partners that provided legitimacy to the intervention were opposed to the presence of Western ground forces in Libya; this was clearly expressed in the UN SC resolution 1973 (2011).[51] Furthermore, factions within the rebels had their own agenda and would not have agreed to any form of occupation force. In the end, NATO is a military organization and does not have a political mandate; it left politics to diplomats and the UN. The well-performed military actions by the coalition fell short of bringing peace in Libya; the coalition's lack of political clout and the complexity of the political situation frustrated attempts at peaceful nation building.

The military intervention did save numerous lives and any argument that Libya would be better off without it is speculation with no basis in fact. It is not so much the coalition military intervention that should be questioned, but the political intervention.

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[51] UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1973. Para. 4.

The Libya Contact Group and special advisor appointed by the UN Secretary-General lacked the necessary influence in their attempts to affect positive change in the political transition process; they were reduced to political positioning in the internal struggle for power and influence. Could a more timely political intervention, well-coordinated with the coalition military actions have achieved greater influence? It is an interesting prospect worth considering for future interventions.

CONCLUSION

Addressing humanitarian concerns and political violence without affecting political change may seem appealing. However, it is a dubious proposal[52] in any political crisis, particularly in the light of the prevalent situation Libya was facing. Transition from dictatorship to democracy is a complex process that would inevitably face setbacks. However, after early hope for democracy and peace, Libya has fallen into a bitter civil war; there is little possibility for a quick settlement to the on-going disputes that have left many involved bitter, first and foremost the Libyan population. A stabilization force seemed an obvious solution, but for domestic, international and geopolitical interest the international community and the Libyans opposed this option.

The future of Libya remains uncertain. Demobilization of militias is a pre-requisite to any fair democratic process,[53] but as militias are currently used as a political tool and beyond the proper control of political forces, they remain a significant threat to peace and stability. Current UN-sponsored negotiations between rebel factions have

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[52] Domansky, Jensen, Bryson, p. 25.
[53] Sadiki, p. 312.

reach a crisis point. As parties likely prefer outcomes offered by military action, the

protracted civil war has no end in sight.

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UN Security Council Resolution 1970 (26 February, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1970.

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