



Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene

BOTTOM LINES

- **The Conventional Wisdom Is Wrong.** Libya's 2011 uprising was never peaceful, but instead was armed and violent from the start. Muammar al-Qaddafi did not target civilians or resort to indiscriminate force. Although inspired by humanitarian impulse, NATO's intervention did not aim mainly to protect civilians, but rather to overthrow Qaddafi's regime, even at the expense of increasing the harm to Libyans.
- **The Intervention Backfired.** NATO's action magnified the conflict's duration about sixfold, and its death toll at least sevenfold, while also exacerbating human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation in Libya and its neighbors. If Libya was a "model intervention," then it was a model of failure.
- **Three Lessons.** First, beware rebel propaganda that seeks intervention by falsely crying genocide. Second, avoid intervening on humanitarian grounds in ways that reward rebels and thus endanger civilians, unless the state is already targeting noncombatants. Third, resist the tendency of humanitarian intervention to morph into regime change, which amplifies the risk to civilians.

By Alan J. Kuperman

This policy brief is based on "A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign," which appears in the Summer 2013 issue of International Security.

A MODEL INTERVENTION?

Many commentators have praised NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya as a humanitarian success for averting a bloodbath in that country's second largest city, Benghazi, and helping eliminate the dictatorial regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi. These proponents accordingly claim that the intervention demonstrates how to successfully implement a humanitarian principle known as the responsibility to protect (R2P). Indeed, the top U.S. representatives to the transatlantic alliance declared that "NATO's operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention." A more rigorous assessment, however, reveals that NATO's intervention backfired: it increased the duration of Libya's civil war by about six times and its death toll by at least seven times, while also exacerbating

human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation in Libya and its neighbors. If this is a "model intervention," then it is a model of failure.

FLAWED NARRATIVE

The conventional account of Libya's conflict and NATO's intervention is misleading in several key aspects. First, contrary to Western media reports, Qaddafi did not initiate Libya's violence by targeting peaceful protesters. The United Nations and Amnesty International have documented that in all four Libyan cities initially consumed by civil conflict in mid-February 2011—Benghazi, Al Bayda, Tripoli, and Misurata—violence was actually initiated by the protesters. The government responded to the rebels militarily but never intentionally targeted civilians or resorted to "indiscriminate" force, as Western media claimed. Early press accounts exaggerated the death toll by a factor of ten, citing "more than 2,000 deaths" in Benghazi during the initial days of the

uprising, whereas Human Rights Watch (HRW) later documented only 233 deaths across all of Libya in that period.

Further evidence that Qaddafi avoided targeting civilians comes from the Libyan city that was most consumed by the early fighting, Misurata. HRW reports that of the 949 people wounded there in the rebellion's initial seven weeks, only 30 were women or children, meaning that Qaddafi's forces focused narrowly on combatants. During that same period, only 257 people were killed among the city's population of 400,000—a fraction less than 0.0006—providing additional proof that the government avoided using force indiscriminately. Moreover, Qaddafi did not perpetrate a “bloodbath” in any of the cities that his forces recaptured from rebels prior to NATO intervention—including Ajdabiya, Bani Walid, Brega, Ras Lanuf, Zawiya, and much of Misurata—so there was virtually no risk of such an outcome if he had been permitted to recapture the last rebel stronghold of Benghazi.

The conventional wisdom is also wrong in asserting that NATO's main goal in Libya was to protect civilians. Evidence reveals that NATO's primary aim was to overthrow Qaddafi's regime, even at the expense of increasing the harm to Libyans. NATO attacked Libyan forces indiscriminately, including some in retreat and others in Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte, where they posed no threat to civilians. Moreover, NATO continued to aid the rebels even when they repeatedly rejected government cease-fire offers that could have ended the violence and spared civilians. Such military assistance included weapons, training, and covert deployment of hundreds of troops from Qatar, eventually enabling the rebels to capture and summarily execute Qaddafi and seize power in October 2011.

THE INTERVENTION BACKFIRED

The biggest misconception about NATO's intervention is that it saved lives and benefited Libya and its neighbors. In reality, when NATO intervened in mid-March 2011, Qaddafi already had regained control of

most of Libya, while the rebels were retreating rapidly toward Egypt. Thus, the conflict was about to end, barely six weeks after it started, at a toll of about 1,000 dead, including soldiers, rebels, and civilians caught in the crossfire. By intervening, NATO enabled the rebels to resume their attack, which prolonged the war for another seven months and caused at least 7,000 more deaths.

The best development in postwar Libya was the democratic election of July 2012, which brought to office a moderate, secular coalition government—a stark change from Qaddafi's four-decade dictatorship. Other developments, however, have been less encouraging. The victorious rebels perpetrated scores of reprisal killings and expelled 30,000 mostly black residents of Tawerga on grounds that some had been “mercenaries” for Qaddafi. HRW reported in 2012 that such abuses “appear to be so widespread and systematic that they may amount to crimes against humanity.” Ironically, such racial or ethnic violence had never occurred in Qaddafi's Libya.

Radical Islamist groups, suppressed under Qaddafi, emerged as the fiercest rebels during the war and refused to disarm or submit to government authority afterward. Their persistent threat was highlighted by the September 2012 attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three of his colleagues. Even more recently, in April 2013, a vehicle bomb destroyed half of the French embassy in the capital, Tripoli. In light of such insecurity, it is understandable that most Libyans responding to a postwar poll expressed nostalgia for a strong leader such as Qaddafi.

Among neighboring countries, Mali, which previously had been the region's exceptional example of peace and democracy, has suffered the worst consequences from the intervention. After Qaddafi's defeat, his ethnic Tuareg soldiers of Malian descent fled home and launched a rebellion in their country's north, prompting the Malian army to overthrow the president. The rebellion soon was hijacked by local Islamist forces and al-Qaida, which together imposed

sharia and declared the vast north an independent country. By December 2012, the northern half of Mali had become “the largest territory controlled by Islamic extremists in the world,” according to the chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Africa. This chaos also spurred massive displacement of hundreds of thousands of Malian civilians, which Amnesty International characterized as “Mali’s worst human rights situation in 50 years.”

Sophisticated weapons from Qaddafi’s arsenal—including up to 15,000 man-portable, surface-to-air missiles unaccounted for as of 2012—leaked to radical Islamists throughout the region. NATO’s intervention on behalf of Libya’s rebels also encouraged Syria’s formerly peaceful protesters to switch to violence in mid-2011, in hopes of attracting a similar intervention. The resulting escalation in Syria magnified that country’s killing rate by tenfold.

LESSONS

NATO’s intervention in Libya offers at least three important lessons for implementing the responsibility to protect. First, potential interveners should beware both misinformation and rebel propaganda. If Western countries had accurately perceived Libya’s initial civil conflict—as Qaddafi using discriminate force against violent tribal, regional, and radical Islamist rebels—NATO would have been much less likely to launch its counterproductive intervention.

The second lesson is that humanitarian intervention can backfire by escalating rebellion. This is because some substate groups believe that by violently provoking state retaliation, they can attract such intervention

to help achieve their political objectives, including regime change. The resulting escalation, however, magnifies the threat to noncombatants before any potential intervention can protect them. Thus, the prospect of humanitarian intervention, which is intended to protect civilians, may instead imperil them via a moral hazard dynamic. To mitigate this pathology, it is essential to avoid intervening on humanitarian grounds in ways that reward rebels, unless the state is targeting noncombatants.

A final lesson is that intervention initially motivated by the desire to protect civilians is prone to expanding its objective to include regime change, even if doing so magnifies the danger to civilians, contrary to the interveners’ original intent. That is partly because intervening states, when justifying their use of force to domestic and international audiences, demonize the regime of the country they are targeting. This demonization later inhibits the interveners from considering a negotiated settlement that would permit the regime or its leaders to retain some power, which typically would be the quickest way to end the violence and protect noncombatants. Such lessons from NATO’s use of force in Libya suggest the need for considerable caution and a comprehensive exploration of alternatives when contemplating if and how to conduct humanitarian military intervention.

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RELATED RESOURCES

Crawford, Timothy W., and Alan J. Kuperman, eds. *Gambling on Humanitarian Intervention: Moral Hazard, Rebellion, and Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Kuperman, Alan J. “The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 49–80.

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UN Human Rights Council, nineteenth session, “Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya,” A/HRC/19/68, advance unedited version, March 2, 2012.

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