



NDC Research Report

*Research Division
NATO Defense College*

March 2012

Six Strategic Lessons learned from Libya: NATO's Operation Unified Protector

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Operation Unified Protector (OUP) is one of NATO's shorter, and seemingly also less controversial, missions. Mandated by both the League of Arab States and the United Nations, the aim of the Alliance in undertaking OUP was to protect civilians from the air and sea. As the operation came to an end after 204 days and 26,323 sorties (including 9,658 strike sorties),² 3,124 vessels in the Mediterranean had been hailed, Colonel Gaddafi's regime had been toppled and many civilian lives had probably been saved. OUP has thus been described as a success, although a balanced assessment will ultimately have to take into account Libya's still uncertain future development and the impact of the crisis on regional security.

Some commentators argue that in any case OUP can at best be judged to have achieved its aims only by accident, as the operation highlighted shortcomings in NATO's structure and equipment. Important technical lessons were identified in a number of other respects too, such as the need for more targeteers and better intelligence sharing.³

While these technical insights are admittedly important, there are also a number of strategic lessons to be learned from the Alliance's Libyan adventure.

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² Sorties in general are military deployments with a specific mission; strike sorties are intended to identify and engage appropriate targets, but need not always involve deployment of ammunition.

³ RUSI, "Accidental Heroes: Britain, France and the Libya Operation", September 2011, available at <http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/RUSIInterimLibyaReport.pdf>

Lesson 1: Do not draw the wrong conclusions regarding air power

OUP promised to be a “clean” conflict conducted solely from the air and sea, as specified by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 in the requirement that there be no “foreign occupation force of any form”.⁴ In the event, NATO indeed suffered no casualties and its air power provided protection for many civilians (sea power was used only for the enforcement of the weapons embargo). The understandably widespread – yet mistaken – conclusion was that this offered an effective demonstration of how warfare will be in the future, finally making it possible to circumvent the “zero tolerance” that Western societies profess for casualties.

The flaw in this reasoning is that the fight between Libyan rebels and the regime forces was in actual fact not won by air power, though this was admittedly the decisive element. The real battle was fought on the ground, by the armed elements of the National Transitional Council (NTC) of Libya and its vast, albeit secretive array of ground troops which preferred to ignore UNSCR 1973. An example of this is the deployment of troops from Qatar, NATO’s partner not only in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative but also during OUP, which has admitted sending in several hundred men to support the rebels by running training and communication operations. More importantly, NTC chairman Mustafa Abdel-Jalil declared that the battles which ultimately led to victory were planned by Qatari officers since the rebels, mostly civilians without any military background, were incapable of organizing professional forces.

Thus, while NATO continued to stress that it did not have a ground component, it effectively did – though not one which came under its command or with which the Alliance could officially have direct communication. Coordinating with a crucial component which was only partly trained, unavailable for direct contact and outside the command structure proved to be a challenge for Joint Force Command Naples, in charge of the operation. Creative ways had to be found in order to visualize the situation on the ground and lead the mission to success; according to Qatar’s Chief of Staff, Major General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya, it was their liaison officers in Naples who provided a link between NATO and the rebel forces.⁵

Against this background, air power offered a “clean” war only on the side of the Alliance. Rebel forces, as well as civilians, paid a heavy toll, though the exact number of casualties remains unknown. While the NTC’s health minister announced up to 30,000 casualties,⁶ the breakdown of civilians and rebel fighters is unknown and large-scale human rights violations were reported by the United Nations.

The Alliance itself has not given any numbers, but it is clear that only a fraction of casualties were due to NATO attacks. These did not target the electrical grid or other civilian infrastructure useful to

4 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, March 17, 2011, available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf?OpenElement>

5 Al-Arabiya, “Qatar admits it had boots on the grounds in Libya, NTC seeks further NATO help”, October 26, 2011, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/26/173833.html>

6 Tripoli Post, “At least 30,000 Killed, 50,000 Wounded in Libyan Conflict”, September 8, 2011, available at <http://www.tripolipost.com/articledetail.asp?c=1&i=6862&archive=1>

Gaddafi's military, while leaflets were dropped and radio messages broadcast in an attempt to keep civilians away from military infrastructure. Human Rights Watch estimates that about 50 civilians died in the context of an Allied strike, while an investigation of the United Nations puts the figure at 60.⁷ Regardless of what caused them, though, Libyan casualties did not register strongly with Western audiences, who saw the whole land component as uncritical to the overall success of the Libyan rebellion. Yet this conclusion is wrong: air power works best when integrated with land forces, and conflicts cannot be won only from the air.⁸

Lesson 2: The JFC Naples structure

Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFC Naples), one of the three current operational commands of NATO, was tasked with coordinating the military actions required for implementation of UNSCR 1973, calling for protection of civilians by all necessary means. The Headquarters, in the South of Italy, does not have a permanent area of responsibility as its predecessor AFSOUTH (Allied Forces Southern Europe) did – in other words, its proximity to the Mediterranean does not necessarily imply a strategic focus on that area. When JFC Naples replaced AFSOUTH in 2004, its primary anticipated mission was to provide a leaner, more flexible structure, with a focus on a range of operations including peacekeeping and peace enforcement but with no specific area in mind. Before the Libyan crisis erupted, JFC Naples was already running NATO Training Mission Iraq, the Kosovo Force and Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean. Against this background, the capacity to take over OUP could hardly be taken for granted: it required kinetic action rather than peace enforcement, and the region concerned demanded specialist expertise.

The speed with which the mission was taken on meant that staff had to be drafted in from other divisions within JFC Naples, while the operational headquarters were hastily set up in a ballroom. Although in theory NATO's Force Command in Madrid could be relied on to draft in the necessary personnel, the speed of the mission as well as the specific skill requirements effectively precluded this possibility. As the Alliance's bureaucracy seemed at times to rule out the urgency of military action (partner officers were told computers would not be available in less than three months), JFC Naples was not properly equipped for an actual crisis of this dimension, but managed to improvise on a large scale.

As NATO remodels its command structure, these shortcomings are being partly addressed and JFC Naples will grow into a Headquarters capable of deploying up to a major joint operation into theatre. However, since the uncertainty brought on by the Arab Spring makes instability and violence a likely scenario, the Mediterranean remains an area of concern where NATO might need capacities for operations ranging from R2P⁹ missions to peacekeeping. Manning and equipping the Headquarters

7 Al Arabiya News, "HRW urges NATO to probe Libyan civilians' deaths but Libya says no need to investigate", December 16, 2011, see <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/16/182835.html>; United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya (New York, March 2, 2012), p. 17.

8 See also Grant T. Hammond, "Myths of the Air War over Serbia: Some 'Lessons' Not to Learn", *Aerospace Power Journal*, Winter 2000, available at <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj00/win00/hammond.htm>

9 Responsibility to Protect: a United Nations concept designed to prevent genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

appropriately would be the logical consequence of this consideration, as would the allocation of a specific area of responsibility.

Lesson 3: Know thy enemy

Although no less than General Sun Tzu postulated that knowing your enemy is crucial in conflict, the Alliance decided to forego this insight. Surprising but true, OUP involved no cultural advisers from Libya – or from any other country for that matter. While some officers from Arab partner states present in the operational headquarters were occasionally asked for advice, there was no structured approach to a nation which has been visited and studied all too little for the last four decades. Assumptions and expectations about Libyan behaviour were poor substitutes for sound assessments from advisers acquainted with the country and its culture. Any glaring shortfall in understanding of Libyan events during the uprising (such as the difficulty in interpreting the apparent passivity shown by the population of Tripoli) thus tended to be met with available ad-hoc “Arab” expertise. When NATO tried to anticipate the strategic choices of Berber tribes in the country’s West, for example, it chose not to seek reliable advice on the matter. Given that the ground component was crucial to the mission’s success, cultural advice would have made an important contribution to general understanding of the situation within Libya as the operation evolved.

As JFC Naples later recognized, Libya differs vastly in culture from the Gulf states present during the operation; more importantly, historical and political knowledge of Libya would have facilitated strategic planning in a *terra incognita* which was being dealt with from the air. Given the confusion over the possible behaviour of different tribes, of the Berbers and of Gaddafi’s forces, it is not clear why cultural advice was deemed unnecessary – bearing in mind that direct communication with the rebels was prohibited. While NATO continues to deal with nations and cultures very different from those of Europe or North America, it is rather slow in acknowledging the importance of having an accurate grasp of local conditions outside the purely military field. The success eventually achieved by OUP should not lead to the conclusion that cultural advisers are unnecessary. What must really be asked is whether success could have come earlier with a thorough understanding of local circumstances – e.g. in anticipating rebel and civilian population behaviour, be it in Tripoli or Misrata, on the basis of sound judgment rather than speculation.

Lesson 4: Close the politico-military gap

As the legal interpretations of UNSCR 1973 made clear, OUP did not seek to topple Colonel Gaddafi’s regime, let alone assassinate him. Unfortunately, the gap between military tasking and political guidance became apparent when the Alliance’s Foreign Ministers, together with the partners participating in OUP, “strongly” endorsed the Contact Group’s call for Gaddafi to leave power.¹⁰ The impression that NATO’s operation was really about changing the Libyan regime hence solidified, regardless of the fact that JFC Naples continued to interpret UNSCR 1973 strictly in terms of providing

¹⁰ NATO: Statement on Libya, April 14, 2011, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_72544.htm

civilian protection. As pressure mounted throughout the summer of 2011, OUP commander General Charles Bouchard had to explain that his orders were “not regime change or to kill a head of state”.¹¹ Yet the clear discrepancy between the political and the military level, as well as between NATO as a collective and its individual member states, confused many. This was particularly true of Russia and China, which had acquiesced to UNSCR 1973 only because it was precisely not about regime change. As the Syrian case showed a few months later, political capital was thus squandered by the inconsistency between the political and military levels. This meant that the political problem was passed on to the military level, where it did not belong, and that NATO’s military arm was burdened with the squaring of a circle.

The same is true of the legal distinction between Allied and national caveats. As General Bouchard was not allowed to have direct contacts with the rebels, he encountered the head of the NTC in his Canadian capacity. The role of Qatar, a NATO partner and participant in OUP which deliberately overstepped UNSCR 1973 by sending ground forces into Libya, has already been mentioned above.¹² In the public perception, this legal distinction is not necessarily clear and contributes to confusion between NATO as a collective and its individual members or partner nations.

Lesson 5: Improve Strategic Communication

Though NATO put a lot of effort into explaining its action in Libya by setting up YouTube channels and holding daily press conferences, its media output still looked rather bleak compared to the coverage provided by the Gaddafi regime with the help of a PR firm. NATO simply could not compete with the BBC being led into hospitals and shown corpses of young children, or the use of words such as “colonialism” and “imperialism” to tap into traditional Arab grievances. While NATO refused to take a clear stance on the number of civilian casualties, reports in the Arab as well as the Russian media spoke of well over 1,000 civilians killed or wounded by NATO air strikes.¹³

Although there *was* Arab support for the NATO operation, news coverage remained neutral to negative depending on the region, and proved volatile throughout the conflict. Al-Jazeera, a channel the Alliance has quarrelled with in the past over Afghanistan, defended the operation prominently and helped strengthen Arab support, but others remained critical of the number of civilian deaths. As a result, NATO’s traditionally rather negative image in the region has not yet changed; the long-term impact of OUP in this respect will depend to a large extent on internal Libyan developments. Although the Alliance’s contribution very likely saved a large number of civilian lives, the role it played in this respect might well be obscured by other, negative developments.

11 BBC News, “Libya conflict: NATO’s man against Gaddafi”, June 26, 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13919380>

12 Al-Arabiya, “Qatar admits it had boots on the grounds in Libya, NTC seeks further NATO help”, October 26, 2011, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/26/173833.html>

13 Russia Today: “Civilian cost of NATO victory in Libya”, October 20, 2011, available at <http://rt.com/news/libya-nato-civilian-deaths-323/>

Overall, the strategic communication of the regime forces (and of the National Transitional Council as well) was better attuned to the local sentiment of target audiences and thus to the most relevant media profile. The extremely rapid creation of the rebel TV station Libya Ahrar (“Free Libya”) reflects a constantly growing agility and adaptability in strategic communication. NATO has to adapt to this sooner rather than later.

Lesson 6: There is no strategic vision for the region

Germany’s abstention in the United Nations Security Council on Resolution 1973 was widely seen as indicative of a rift in Alliance cohesion, as was the limited Allied participation in the operation. Yet this was a logical continuation of the lack of common vision for the MENA region which has plagued NATO ever since its inception: regional conflicts, with the possible exception of Iraq in 1991, have always divided the Allies.

In spite of the Alliance’s two partnership programmes, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO members have so far had extremely divergent visions of how the region should be dealt with. This is not only a left-over from the Alliance’s first four decades, when the Mediterranean and its Southern rim hardly featured outside the Cold War context, but is also attributable to differing analyses of which regions mattered to the Alliance after the end of the Soviet threat. Depending on their geographical location, different Allies would emphasize the Central, the Northern or the Southern front.

Mostly, however, this lack of vision reflects a strong preference of individual Allies for bi- or trilateralism when dealing with this part of the world. As a region of international importance in view of its oil resources, the vital east-west trade route and the choke points which could bring so much of the world’s trade to a halt, it attracts those Allies with strategic interests that might threaten NATO consensus. The Alliance therefore needs to agree on a common vision, if it is to have any chance of success in continuing to reach out into its Southern neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The euphoria over the end of a brutal regime which lasted four decades in Libya should not disguise the fact that the consequences of OUP are not fully visible yet. Indeed, a number of lessons to be learned will possibly emerge only several years after the end of the operation. It would be a mistake to think that NATO’s Libya adventure ended with the drawdown of the military mission – whether the Alliance likes it or not, its reputation is at stake in Libya’s long reconstruction process. In the meantime, NATO needs to continue to adapt to a world that remains as unpredictable as ever.