



# Executive Summary



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## THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION AND LIBYA: REVIEWING OPERATION UNIFIED PROTECTOR

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On March 17, 2011, a month after the beginnings of the Libyan revolution and up to 2,000 civilians dead, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decided to back a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized “all necessary measures” to protect civilians. While France, Great Britain, and the United States took immediate military action using air and missile strikes, considerations to hand this mission over to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) emerged within days of the operation. On March 22, 2012, NATO agreed to enforce the arms embargo against Libya; 2 days later, it announced that it would take over all military aspects of the UNSC Resolution 1973. On March 31, 2012, Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR (OUP) began. For the first time in its history, NATO was at war with an Arab country.

OUP turned out to be one of NATO’s shorter, and seemingly also less controversial, missions. Mandated by both the League of Arab States and the UN as the regime of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was launching assaults on peacefully demonstrating citizens, OUP had the aim of protecting 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), 3,124 vessels in the Mediterranean Sea had been hailed, Qaddafi’s regime had been toppled, and many civilian lives had probably been saved. OUP has thus been described as a success—a success NATO badly needed after its decade-long engagement in Afghanistan. However, the Libyan

operation was not without its critics. Described as a “war of choice” rather than a “war of necessity,” it achieved its goals more by accident than by design, according to some commentators. Yet, the operation also exposed strategic shortcomings.

### **Lesson 1: Do Not Draw the Wrong Conclusions Regarding Air Power.**

While the air power element in OUP was crucial, the war was not won from the air. Although NATO did not have boots on the ground, there were, indeed, ground troops: the Libyan rebel forces. Just as air power works best when integrated with land forces, NATO’s operation was, in part, decided by those forces engaged with the Libyan regime’s forces—although both forces were not truly integrated. Most analyses ignore the ground element of OUP because it was not under NATO’s operational control—but it was the crucial factor in the conflict.

### **Lesson 2: Rethink NATO’s Command Structure.**

Overall, NATO’s command structure has been downsized significantly since the end of the Cold War: in five revisions overall, it has shrunk from over five million active military and 78 headquarters to 3.8 million active military and 11 headquarters. The ongoing reform of the command structure will reduce this number further. Joint

Force Command Naples (JFC-Naples), in charge of the operation, 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 theater.

### **Lesson 3: Do Not Ignore Culture.**

NATO's Libya operation was the Alliance's first combat action against an Arab country. In spite of this, the Alliance paid rather limited attention to Libya's cultural terrain and had no cultural advisers on the staff of OUP—not from Libya, not from another Arab country, and not from anyone familiar with local conditions. The improvised advice OUP relied on turned out to be a failure; as officers involved in the campaign admitted, nobody predicted several of the turns the operation took. 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.

### **Lesson 4: Close the Politico-Military Gap.**

As the legal interpretations of UNSC Resolution 1973 made clear, the operation did not seek to topple Qaddafi's regime, let alone assassinate him. Its aim was solely the protection of civilians in a situation of internal conflict, and therefore it conformed to the norm of "Responsibility to Protect"—yet, against the backdrop of international political pressure, the Alliance's neutrality and its agenda quickly became a point of discussion. 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 UNSC Resolution 1973 strictly in terms of providing 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."

### **Lesson 5: Improve Strategic Communication.**

In 2009, only 2 years before the crisis in Libya erupted, NATO issued its first Strategic Communications concept, which aimed at supporting an operation's objectives by ensuring "that audiences receive clear, fair, and opportune information regarding actions and that the interpretation of the Alliance's messages are not left solely to NATO's adversaries or other audiences." Nevertheless, criticism on the Alliance's methods emerged shortly after the mission's inception.

In comparison, the Libyan regime's strategic communication proved to be resilient and creative. It succeeded not only in recruiting a public relations firm for this purpose, but managed to escort BBC journalists into a hospital, showing corpses of young children supposedly killed in NATO air strikes. Tapping into traditional Arab grievances, Qaddafi used words such as "colonialism" and "imperialism," called the rebels "NATO agents," and promised to exterminate them like rats.

### **Lesson 6: The Aftermath of Intervention.**

Although calling on NATO and hinting at possible requests from Arab states to assist Libya in the immediate aftermath of the end of the conflict, the Libyan National Transitional Council firmly rejected any military personnel on the ground, not even UN observers. As the regime's security forces had virtually imploded, Libya's security therefore fell into the hands of the multiple militias, which continued to proliferate after the conflict had ended. In a situation of effective lawlessness, militia leaders refused disbandment as long as no military or police force could take over. If the government is unable to take control of the security sector back, Libya might very well be headed to a failed-state scenario—which, of course, would cast a shadow on NATO's operation as well.

The euphoria over the end of a brutal regime that lasted 4 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 OUP mission. 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.

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