

What role for the EU in the new Libya?

Written by Stefan Wolff

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STEFAN WOLFF, OCT 22 2011

After more than 25,000 sorties and close to 10,000 airstrikes over the past six months, NATO is expecting to wind down its Libya operation by the end of October. As Steve Saideman has pointed out, this marks the fourth success of a NATO operation since the end of the Cold War, with the other two still on-going missions—Afghanistan and piracy off the coast of Somalia—undecided as of yet (even though the prospects are not good).

Operation Unified Protector was never mandated as regime change under the UN Security Council Resolution that authorised it, but it was clear early on that the way in which NATO pursued the protection of civilians would inevitably lead to the end of the Gadhafi regime. NATO's success was, and in the longer term remains, dependent on the National Transitional Council (NTC). Without the tremendous efforts by Libyan fighters on the ground, NATO's air campaign would not have been able to dislodge the Gadhafi regime. Nor would Libyans have been able to defeat Gadhafi without NATO's military support and the wider political and financial backing that they have enjoyed since.

While this was a NATO operation almost solely conducted and led by Europeans—first and foremost the UK and France—the EU has not so far played any significant role. Clearly constrained by its economic and financial crisis, the real blow to concerted and unified EU action was dealt by the German abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973(2011). Until then, the EU had been fully supportive of UN actions and contributed to enforcing sanctions against the Gadhafi regime. A joint statement by the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, and the EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on the day the crucial UN resolution was passed already indicated more lukewarm support of the EU, noting its readiness “to implement this Resolution *within its mandate and competences*” and the subsequent Council Conclusions three days later unsurprisingly offered no more than “CSDP support to humanitarian assistance in response to a request from OCHA and under the coordinating role of the UN.” At that time, the NATO military operation, carried predominantly by military forces of EU members Britain and France, was already in full swing. A starker contrast could hardly be imagined.

The EU did follow up with a Council Decision on an EU military operation in support of humanitarian assistance operations in Libya, setting up operational headquarters in Rome and preparing various scenarios. Embarrassingly, a request for EU activating EU military assistance was never made. EU Military Staff and assets were, however, involved in the evacuation of EU citizens from Libya and third-country refugees via Tunisia.

While it is easy (and not wrong) to belittle the inability of the EU to offer any substantial military support during the Libyan crisis (even though it did, through its member states, clearly have the necessary capabilities), the EU has been an important player in a different way: by providing significant humanitarian assistance, worth over €150million. An additional €25million are available for short-term stabilisation needs, as well as a further €60million for assistance in the transition process. These will include measures decided together with the transitional government to build up state institutions, to support civil society, human rights and democratisation, to provide health services and assist with border management and security sector reform.

The EU's military embarrassment to one side, the Union does have substantial experience and a positive track record in these civilian crisis management operations—which it has carried out with great success on three continents. From the joint EU/ASEAN mission that monitored the implementation of the Aceh peace agreement in Indonesia (including a substantial disarmament operation), to police training and advisory missions in Afghanistan,

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Macedonia, Bosnia, the Palestinian Territories and the DRC, from EU border assistance missions at the Moldova/Ukraine and Egypt/Gaza borders to missions supporting security sector reform in Guinea-Bissau and the DRC, and to missions supporting the strengthening of the rule of law in Iraq, Georgia, and Kosovo. Although some of these missions are still on-going, they all have been at least qualified successes—they have fulfilled their, albeit sometimes narrowly conceived, mandates and in most cases contributed to lasting stability and improved security on the ground. In addition, the EU, as a collective of its 27 member states, remains the largest donor of development assistance, including support of state-building, administrative reform, and public sector capacity building. In all of these areas, the EU works closely with other international and regional organisations and the governments and civil society of recipient countries.

This is where the EU can make a real contribution to the future of Libya, and the statement by the High Representative following the fall of Sirte and the death of Gadhafi clearly indicate the Union's willingness to become a strong partner of the new Libya. The EU and Libya need each other economically and politically. The EU is one of Libya's most important export markets, and EU energy security is to a significant extent dependent on supplies from that country. Libya and the EU have a joint interest in the management of migratory movements from Africa to Europe. Stability in Libya and the country's successful transition to democracy are crucial to security in the EU's southern neighbourhood, not least because of the symbolic effect for other countries of the Arab Spring that is likely to ensue.

Perhaps, looking back at the EU's performance in the Libyan crisis in five years' time, the best lesson to (re-) learn is that the EU is not good at hard security policy, but does a very decent job when the task is about dealing with the aftermath of conflict. At one level, this may be sobering (if not frustrating). At another level, it is worth remembering that while dictatorial regimes are defeated on the battlefield, stable democracies cannot be built there and that they require a whole different set of capabilities than what NATO can offer. In this sense, NATO's military triumph and the EU's military embarrassment may well be just two sides of the same coin of the eventual success of the Libyan revolution and the country's transition to democracy.

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