

May the Odds Be Ever in Your Favor: How the Involvement of the United States of America and NATO Negatively Impacted the 2011 Libyan Civil War

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and reviews the intervention of NATO and the United States of America in the 2011 Libyan Civil War. Civilian casualties, outside influence for the United States intervention and a lack of transparency from NATO are analyzed, with the purpose of identifying how the intervention of the United States and NATO negatively impacted the 2011 Libyan Civil War. This paper will use sources such as interviews, journals, and commentaries and statistics to analyse the impacts and motivations of the intervention of the Libyan Civil War, concluding that the impacts made were long-term and negative on the country and surrounding areas. What once was a back seat position for the United States quickly became a mission driven by them. Furthermore, the intervention resulted in a decline of the welfare of Libyan citizens and countless avoidable deaths due to a lack of security. Consequently, the intervention of the United States and NATO in the 2011 Libyan Civil War caused harm that followed their intervention both nationally and internationally, lacked interest for national involvement, and the overstepped power. Ultimately, the purpose of the paper is to raise awareness to the impact of an armed intervention as well as to appeal to citizens in voting countries to use their power.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss how the intervention of the United States of America and NATO negatively impacted the 2011 Libyan Civil War. The country was in a state of unrest for decades before war broke out. When the National Transition Council gained control over eastern Libya, they appealed for international aid. NATO and Arab allies agreed and Libya's dictator, Muammar al Gaddafi was killed. NATO pulled their forces out of the country leaving Libya with fighting powers and continuing disorder. The analysis of the question "how did the intervention of the United States and NATO negatively impact the 2011 Libyan Civil War" will demonstrate and explain that though there were claims to help the Libyan people, ultimately more harm was done than good.

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This is significant because a broader perspective of the many actions and impacts during this time allows for a deeper understanding of the matters, motives, and means during and after the Libyan Civil War. Sources are used to gather information of the different views of the Libyan Civil War and analyzed to reach and support a conclusive argument regarding how the intervention negatively impacted the Libyan people and many others. Background information is provided to give an overview of the history of the civil war and periods of time that are significantly impacted afterwards. The harm that followed the intervention will be broken down into civilian deaths, fighting powers for control of the country, and spillover conflict and trafficking abuses. Following this the lack of national interest is analyzed through the initial hesitation of the United States, the lead the United States was forced to take, and the lack of agreement among the Obama Administration. Then the overstepping of powers is investigated through the purpose of Responsibility to Protect and Resolution 1973, the mission creep which occurred and the oil benefits for NATO. Finally, opposing arguments are analyzed, including the humanitarian interest and lack of American deaths before coming to the conclusion of how the intervention of the United States and NATO negatively impacted the 2011 Libya Civil War.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will utilize sources to summarize the events of the Libyan Civil War, describing the beginning of the uprising through the end of the war. The sources applied include published journal articles, White House Interviews, NATO articles and commentaries. Three proofs are analyzed to address the negative effects of the NATO and United States Intervention: harm following the intervention, a lack of national interest for the United States and the overstepping of power from NATO. The sources which consider the harm to the Libyan people and to surrounding countries are applied to present the short-term and long-term impacts of the lack of a governing body. Commentaries and excerpts from interviews are applied to display the lack of initial interest of United States involvement as well as the role of the NATO allies' persuasion. Lastly, statistics of oil and articles are presented to demonstrate the benefits of the intervention for NATO, as well as an analysis of the lack of transparency from NATO regarding their actions. Each of these proofs will conclude that the Libyan Civil War was ultimately negatively impacted by the intervention of the United States and NATO. While some sources argue that intervention was necessary, after an analysis, this paper will conclude that the negative impacts outweigh the necessity of the intervention. By investigating the studies and research, the paper's objective is to analyze the negative impacts of the intervention of the United States and NATO. Some of the sources used are in favor of the intervention while other sources believe the outcome is harmful rather than helpful. This paper is able to draw a conclusion by analysing and using evidence from both sides to support its argument to provide a larger perspective of the intervention of the Libyan Civil War.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The turmoil in Libya began in 1969 when Muammar al Gaddafi seized control of the country. Despite reports of life expectancy rising and illiteracy rates dropping, the lives of the Libyan people were not

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improving. Over the course of the next four decades, there was a major housing crisis in Libya. Additionally, the economy was in a state of decline due to a decrease in oil prices, Libya's main source of income. Protesters became rebel fighters and the National Transition Council (NTC) took control of the eastern part of the country. The NTC then appealed to the international community for a no fly-zone. In early 2011, the Arab League as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led by the United States, France and Great Britain, agreed to give their support to the NTC. Then war broke out. In October of that year, Gaddafi was captured and killed. However, the details of his death remain unclear, including who murdered him. Shortly after, NATO pulled out and left Libya with a weak foundation to establish a government. Because of this, a second civil war broke out, and Libyans no longer had the means to establish a new government. To this day, Libya is without a stable governing body.¹

The NTC was the interim government in Libya. The purpose of the NTC was to preserve the unity of Libya and its citizens. This government was comprised of thirty people and acted as the representative of the Libyan citizens. The NTC was assembled in early March of 2011 and was disassembled on August eighth of the same year.² The Libyan National Army (LNA) took control over the east in 2014 and was backed by the Libyan House of Representatives. At the same time, the Government of National Accord (GNA) rose to power in the northwestern and western sides of the country. They were backed by Turkish troops and mercenaries from Syria and Qatar. Due to a lack of government, the LNA fought for power over Libya with the GNA in 2019. In 2020, the LNA and GNA reached a point of ceasefire, having been encouraged by other countries such as Türkiye. However, since then, Türkiye has kept a military presence in Libya.³ NATO, a political and military alliance, consists of thirty-two countries in Europe and North America. The alliance began in 1949. During the Libyan Civil War, the United States, Great Britain, and France took the lead.⁴

Resolution 1973, passed on March 17, 2011, is a document which permits countries such as NATO and their Arab allies to establish a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Libya. This document falls under "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) which is a doctrine that states international communities have the duty to protect any and all citizens who are in danger.⁵

The intervention of the United States and NATO in the 2011 Libyan Civil War caused harm following it, lacked interest for national involvement, and overstepped power.

THE HARM FOLLOWING THE INTERVENTION

The airstrikes by NATO were authorized in accordance with Resolution 1973, which allows international

¹ Griffin Johnsen, "Fall of Gaddafi: 2011 Libyan revolution | Animated History," *Youtube*, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWS3tbwUXyQ>.

² Bassem Aly, "LNA vs GNA: A guide to Libya's Sirte-Jufra battle," *Ahram online*, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/374893/World/Region/LNA-vs-GNA-A-guide-to-Libya's-SirteJufra-battle.aspx>

³ Blanchard, Christopher, "Libya and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, accessed 20 March 2026, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11556/IF11556.33.pdf.

⁴ "NATO Member Countries," *NATO*, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-member-countries>.

⁵ David Rieff, "R2P, RIP," *The New York Times*, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/opinion/r2p-rip.html?smid=em-share>.

forces “to take all necessary measures” to protect civilians, excluding ground occupation. However, this is only permissible in the case to protect any and all civilians when they are endangered. While this may have been NATO’s intention, their bombs killed some of the very same civilians they set out to protect. Airwars, a nonprofit organization that tracks civilian harm in conflict congested countries, conducted a detailed study of the harm that was caused by the airstrikes by all combatants. The estimate was that there were three thousand four hundred people killed and over one thousand more injured. Although the study was thorough, Airwars concluded that this number may be lower than the true amount due to the lack of social media used by Libyans at this time and an inadequate presence of independent media to report such things. When urged by Amnesty International, a human rights organization, to investigate the injuries and deaths caused by their bombing, NATO released a blanket statement apologizing for any damage that followed the strikes.⁶

When Gaddafi died, NATO decided to pull out of Libya, leaving the country with no ruling government. NATO concluded it was better to let the Libyans establish their own government without influence from outside countries.⁷ Despite the NTC’s claims of its ability to establish a new government, they were incapable. Initially the General National Congress (GNC) was created by the NTC to be the new governing body. However, the GNC was decidedly ineffective as they had passed the Political Isolation Law which removed the figures who worked for Gaddafi. Unfortunately, they were the people who were educated and experienced in politics. Soon after, in 2014, a coup began with Khalifa Haftar, and the LNA became the official ruling body. During this time the GNA also was competing for power. Between these two groups fighting for control over the country, Libya was kept in a constant state of war, keeping Libyans in conditions similar to 2011. While the fighting stopped in 2020, the elections to establish a new government have constantly been postponed. With the internal turmoil in Libya, and the external turmoil in the surrounding countries, Türkiye has extended its military presence in Libya until 2028. While Türkiye maintained its influence in Libya, there was no ruling government to protect the people.

Without any proper government, Libya has become susceptible to spillover conflict and human trafficking. After Gaddafi’s death, the Libyan borders were weakened and a security vacuum developed. Weapons that were accumulated during the Libyan Civil War by various combatants were smuggled into Mali. These weapons enabled Malian rebels to overthrow Mali’s government in 2012. Human trafficking and abuse arose from the weak borders of Libya and a lack of regulations as well. Many migrants chose to travel through Libya when fleeing from their countries because it was an easy access point to the Mediterranean Sea and thus Europe. However, these people were often easily manipulated and abused by traffickers to the point of death. One study from the International Organization for Migration reports that approximately six hundred thousand migrants may have been victims of abuse and human rights crimes in

⁶ “Ten years after the Libyan revolution, victims wait for justice,” *Airwars*, accessed March 29, 2026, <https://airwars.org/ten-years-after-libyan-revolution-victims-wait-for-justice/>.

⁷ “NATO and Libya (February-October 2011),” *NATO*, accessed March 29, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/nato-and-libya-february-october-2011?selectedLocale=>.

2018.⁸ The aftermath of the actions and decisions of NATO left a fatal impact on many in Libya and the surrounding area, something which may not have occurred had there been no intervention.

The Lack of National Interest for the United States

The United States' involvement in the 2011 Libyan Civil War lacked national interest for the intervention. There was no security interest prior to the 2011 Libyan Civil War regarding the United States and Libya, nor did the United States have any interest to partake in the affairs of Libya before being persuaded by NATO allies. Former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, persistently endorsed the intervention against Gaddafi. Former Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, remarked "I was sympathetic but not convinced" in regards to Sarkozy's argument for interference.⁹ Later Clinton was persuaded by British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, to intervene. United States Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, further notes that pressure to intervene from the Arab League arose. Ultimately the United States was persuaded by their allies to move against Gaddafi under the intention that the United States would not take the lead.

Despite wanting to play a minor role in NATO's intervention in Libya, the United States was forced to take over. The United States quickly shifted from having no interest in the affairs of Libya to leading the operation. This is primarily due to having more resources than any other ally. These resources ranged from providing fuel for the NATO planes to over one hundred missiles in the beginning of the intervention alone. Robert Gates further states "the United States had to provide the lion's share of the reconnaissance capability and most of the mid-air refueling of planes... we had to resupply even our strongest allies with precision-guided bombs and missiles—they had exhausted their meager supply."¹⁰ Without the United States, NATO would not have the means to carry out this operation.

The United States' concordance to take action was not shared by all the participants of NATO. Many of the NATO allies did not share the eagerness of France and England to execute an operation in Libya. Türkiye and Germany were extremely wary of the campaign. The former believed it would serve to advance western interest in areas such as politics and oil. The latter rightfully suspected it would harm civilians. The United States itself almost decided to stay out of the Libyan affairs. Former United States President Barack Obama revealed the Senate vote was 51-49 on whether an intervention was necessary and he, too, was torn. The rest of the Obama Administration was also divided on this matter. Samantha Power, a senior National Security staffer, and Susan Rice, a UN Ambassador were in congruence with France and England. However, Former Vice President, Joseph Biden and the chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff disagreed with this decision and found it better to stay out of the turmoil in Libya. In conclusion, the United States did not have any interest in becoming involved in the 2011 Libyan Civil War and their decision to do so was heavily influenced by their allies.

⁸ Katie Kuschminder, "Once a Destination for Migrants, Post-Gaddafi Libya Has Gone from Transit Route to Containment," *Migration Policy Institute*, accessed March 20, 2026,

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/once-destination-migrants-post-gaddafi-libya-has-gone-transit-route-containment>.

⁹ Ted Carpenter, "How NATO Pushed the U.S. Into the Libya Fiasco," *Cato Institute*, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/how-nato-pushed-us-libya-fiasco>.

¹⁰ Carpenter, "How NATO Pushed the U.S. Into the Libya Fiasco", *Cato Institute*, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/how-nato-pushed-us-libya-fiasco>.

THE OVERSTEPPING OF POWER

The United States and NATO overstepped the power of R2P in the 2011 Libyan Civil War. The original purpose of Resolution 1973 was to primarily allow the international forces to create a no-fly zone to protect the citizens from Gaddafi's army. Resolution 1973 is justified by Responsibility to Protect. However, Resolution 1973 restricts international forces from putting troops on the ground. By killing Gaddafi and NATO allies sending troops, the mission of Resolution 1973 was overextended. This brought about the disapproval of much of the international community due to a lack of conformity with the extent of the power of R2P. While most of the international community agrees that citizens should be protected, very few believe it should extend to a removal of a sovereign power. After the affairs of Libya in 2011 and the abuse of this power, R2P lost much of its support. The murder of Gaddafi raised a lot of dissonance on whether it was a violation of Libyan sovereignty, displaying the intention of a regime change.

NATO took steps during the 2011 Libyan Civil War which went beyond protecting the civilians and morphed into a regime change, when they specifically gave aid to the Libyan rebel forces. A "mission creep", the overextension from a mission's original purpose, is believed to have occurred due to the measures NATO and their allies took during their time in Libya. Rebel commanders were given guidance from British Special Forces and Qatar sent troops throughout the country. France sent weapons to Libya. NATO then failed to inform the UN Security Council of this with complete transparency until it became public knowledge.¹¹ By doing this, NATO and their allies bypassed the intention of helping the people and entered into a new phase of fueling a rebellion. This is also in direct violation of the Resolution 1973 because it specifically restricted the international community from sending troops. Moreover, Qatar was sending twenty thousand tons of weapons to Libya, an infringement of the arms embargo, which restricts the transfer of arms from one group to another. At the same time, NATO was concealing their actions, they were also securing oil.

Not only is Libya's main source of income oil but it also is a leading source for oil in the world. Libya produced more oil than any other African nation. Libya possessed 46.5 billion barrels of oils in their reserves. In contrast, the United States had only 20.6 barrels of oil in its own reserves at the time.¹² This is another motivation for Western intervention because by removing Gaddafi from power, an opportunity for oil is gained. Libya's consumers include Italy, France and Germany. All three of these countries are a part of NATO, and France specifically pressured its allies to partake in the Libyan Civil War. During a state of unrest, the oil production rate is disrupted. It was in the best interest of these countries to do whatever possible to get rid of the unrest so that they do not lose access to a valuable resource. However, by influencing the rebel groups, as well as overstepping power and killing Gaddafi while claiming it is only for the best interest of the citizens is wrong. It then turns the situation from humanitarian aid to a

¹¹ Colum Lynch, "UN sanctions panel investigates reports of French/Qatari arms transfers to Libya's rebels," *Atlantic Council*, accessed March 20, 2026,

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/un-sanctions-panel-investigates-reports-of-french-qatari-arms-transfers-to-libyas-rebels/>.

¹² Micheal Chossudovsky, "Ten Years Ago: "Operation Libya" and the Battle for Oil: Redrawing the Map of Africa," *Global Research*, accessed April 2, 2026, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/operation-libya-and-the-battle-for-oil-redrawing-the-map-of-africa/23605>

resource grab. This overstepped R2P and Resolution 1973. The intervention of the United States and NATO in the 2011 Libyan Civil War caused harm which followed their intervention, lacked national interest for the United States and overstepped power.

THE HUMANITARIAN INTEREST

Former United States President Barack Obama argued that the humanitarian interest for the protection of Libyan people from the human rights violations committed against them was far more important than neutrality to the conflict. On March 28, 2011, President Obama remarked that Gaddafi was comparing Libyan citizens to rats and hanging civilians. He was proceeding towards a massacre in Benghazi. President Obama states “Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action”.¹³ He believed passivity towards the conflict was an injustice in of itself. While the treatment of Libyans by Gaddafi and his forces was heinous, when NATO pulled out, Libya was left without the capability to reinstate a permanent governing body. In that same conference, President Obama also stated “But broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake”.¹⁴ This was made evident when the country was thrust into a state of chaos and war. The GNA and LNA grasped at bits and pieces of the country in a feeble and fatal attempt for power for years after. The intervention of the United States and NATO in the Libyan Civil War removed the governing power causing further deterioration in Libya and the welfare of its citizens. Despite Gaddafi’s reign ending, the suffering of the masses did not. Ultimately one humanitarian crisis was substituted for another.

THE LOSS OF AMERICAN LIVES

The actions of the United States and NATO are often justified because of the few American lives lost compared to the several thousand lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In comparison, four Americans died in Libya. Indubitably, this number is substantially less. However, smaller is not synonymous to insignificant. Due to a lack of law and order in Libya, those who worked at the United States Embassy in Libya requested more security, which was then denied. On September 11, 2012, the attack on Benghazi occurred. A safe haven in Benghazi was set aflame, killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and information manager Sean Smith. Ambassador Stevens’ body was not recovered.¹⁵ In the same attack, CIA security contractors and ex-navy seals, Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty, sacrificed themselves defending the CIA Base in Benghazi.¹⁶ They were people with families and friends. They were brave and courageous. They were never just four lives lost. America is forever indebted to the heroic men and women who gave their lives in the line of duty. With no national interest for The United States in the intervention, they cost the lives of these men.

¹³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya”, *The White House*, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

¹⁴ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya”.

¹⁵ Erica Ryan, “Chronology: The Benghazi Attack and the Fallout”, *NPR*, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166243318/chronology-the-benghazi-attack-and-the-fallout>.

¹⁶ “Heroes- Tyrone S. Woods”, *CIA*, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.cia.gov/legacy/honoring-heroes/heroes/tyrone-s-woods/>.
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CONCLUSION

The intervention of the United States and NATO in the 2011 Libyan Civil War caused harm following their intervention, lacked interest for national involvement, and overstepped power. Crime increased and the quality of life diminished. The United States had no intent on becoming involved until France and Great Britain were able to persuade U.S. officials. The unnecessary regime change was an abuse of the power of Resolution 1973 and R2P. The humanitarian interest of the Libyans and the few American casualties are not justifications for the intervention.

It is imperative for authorities to understand what it truly means to stage an armed intervention because too often the outcome will worsen the current situation. This research provides a broader perspective on the 2011 Libyan Civil War and the impacts NATO and the United States had on it beyond merely removing a power, demonstrating the amount of impact countries can have on each other as a whole but also to the individual. The research presented contrasts the initial unwillingness of the United States with its NATO allies' lack of ability to report their actions.

Egos are larger than the matter at hand. Lines become blurred and pride takes over when humility should triumph. The innocent people are forgotten. The odds were never in their favor. In a democratic republic, the people have the power, everyone must be educated in the affairs of the world to the best of their ability and know the agenda of those running for office. Knowledge creates awareness and awareness creates understanding. In a world where power takes precedence, knowledge is indispensable. Some are fortunate enough to have it at their fingertips, while others must fight for it. If you are the former, do not take this gift for granted. Rather take advantage of it for all the people who cannot and change the odds.

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