

# Humanitarian intervention in Libya

**Events:** On 19 March 2011, a US-led coalition began a campaign of air and missile strikes against Libyan forces loyal to President Gaddafi. This took place in a context of an emerging civil war, and particularly as pro-Gaddafi troops moved on the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, threatening to cause 'violence on a horrific scale', as President Obama put it. In accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973, the strikes were intended to enforce an arms embargo on Libya, establish a no-fly zone and use 'all necessary measures' to protect Libyan civilians and civilian populated areas. Within days, and as planned, command and control responsibility for the military operation passed from the USA to NATO. NATO intervention effectively neutralized Libya's air force and severely reduced the effectiveness of its heavy weapons, helping, possibly decisively, to tip the balance of the conflict in favour of the Libyan opposition. By early October, the Libyan National Transitional Council had secured control over the entire country and rebels had captured and killed Gaddafi. The NATO operation ended on 31 October, 222 days after it had begun (Daalder and Stavridis 2012).

**Significance:** Did Libya mark revived support for humanitarian intervention, or was it an aberration? As no major humanitarian interventions had occurred since those in Kosovo and East Timor in 1999, and in Sierra Leone in 2000, some had concluded that the era of humanitarian intervention was over, and that it had essentially been a reflection of the unusual circumstances that prevailed during the early post-Cold War period – notably, a strengthened belief that world politics should be guided by moral principles and the emergence of the USA as the world's sole superpower. Humanitarian interventions appeared to have ended both because of the USA's declining appetite for military involvement abroad (in the light of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and because the rise of Russia and China meant that the USA was less likely to have a free hand in such matters. And yet, Libya proved that humanitarian interventions can still take place, and so cannot be ruled out in the future.

Aside from issues of motivation, ranging from self-interest (oil) to genuine humanitarianism, a diverse range of factors conspired to favour intervention in Libya. In the first place, the strong likelihood of impending slaughter in



Benghazi, a city of some 750,000 people, galvanized President Obama, French President Sarkozy and the UK Prime Minister Cameron, the key supporters of intervention. To have stood passively by while mass bloodshed took place in Libya, particularly having given such clear support to earlier Arab Spring uprisings, may have been highly politically damaging. Second, significant international and regional support appeared to give intervention a sound legal basis. Authorization by the UN Security Council and backing for intervention from key regional bodies, notably the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, was made possible by the fact that Gaddafi's Libya was a pariah state with few reliable friends and no close ties to Russia or China. NATO forces also gained greater legitimacy through the participation of partners such as Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Morocco. Third, the operation was deemed to be militarily feasible. Libya's relatively weak air and missile defences and an emphasis on aerial and military strikes promised to keep NATO casualties to a minimum (in the event, there were no NATO casualties) and meant that a 'boots-on-the-ground' war could be avoided. Finally, military and political assessments at the time were optimistic about the likely outcomes of intervention. These suggested (accurately, as it turned out) that, with NATO assistance, the Libyan opposition would be able to overthrow the Gaddafi regime without a protracted, bloody civil war, and (but more questionably) that the Libyan National Transitional Council constituted the basis for a stable and effective post-Gaddafi government.