

## Was the International Intervention in Libya a Success?

Written by Michael Aaronson

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Was the International Intervention in Libya a Success?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/31/was-the-international-intervention-in-libya-a-success/>

MICHAEL AARONSON, OCT 31 2011

With the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2016 of 27 October and the statement on 28 October from the NATO Secretary-General announcing the end of NATO's air campaign, the UN-mandated intervention in Libya is now officially at an end (although the UN Security Council, using the customary language, remains "actively seized of the matter"). Was it a success?

In an obvious sense, it is too early to say. Although the political objective of removing Gaddafi has been achieved the future of Libya is too uncertain for anyone to be able to predict whether the Security Council's hopes for "the swift establishment of an inclusive, representative transitional Government...underpinned by a commitment to democracy, good governance, rule of law, national reconciliation and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people in Libya" will be achieved. Arguably, Libya was a country about which the interveners knew very little at the start of the intervention, and know not much more as it ends. The spectre of "post-conflict" Iraq still looms large. On the other hand, the end of major hostilities does now mean that the UN and others can put "boots on the ground" to help in a significant way with the task of rebuilding the Libyan state.

The justification for the imposition of the no-fly zone that was at the heart of UNSCR 1973 of 17 March was the protection of civilians. This was in direct response to a brutal crackdown by Gaddafi's forces to the initial protests against the regime, combined with terrifying threats to the insurgents from him and from his family members. The perception at the time of impending mass atrocities cannot be discounted and may well have been well-founded. The allied campaign was undoubtedly responsible for denying Gaddafi the opportunity to carry out his threats. Therefore, unsurprisingly, it is claimed now that the NATO-led intervention "was critical to saving many innocent lives". But this claim is unverifiable; no-one can say exactly what would have happened had, for example, the diplomatic rather than the military route been taken back in February and March. And what is certainly undeniable is the considerable cost of the conflict in terms of human lives lost on both sides – even though – as is regrettably the norm in current armed conflicts – this has not been counted with any precision. Thus US Vice-President Joe Biden's claim, as reported in the New York Times, that in achieving victory the US "didn't lose a single life" sounds somewhat hollow, to say the least.

In addition the political cost to the interveners is perhaps yet to be fully counted. Achieving agreement in the Security Council to military intervention was a singular diplomatic success, made possible by the support from the Arab League and other regional bodies. But it very quickly became apparent that the aims of the intervention went beyond the protection of civilians in a narrow sense, and extended to the removal of the Gaddafi regime. Whether, as critics would claim, regime change was always an end in itself, or whether a judgement was made by the allies that protection could only be assured by the overthrow of the regime, the effects were seen in the subsequent refusal of the Security Council to adopt even a much watered-down Resolution on Syria, with explicit reference being made by e.g. the Russians who, along with the Chinese used their veto, to the way the allies had conducted the intervention in Libya.

In similar vein, the Libya intervention may have done damage to the emerging norm of the "Responsibility to Protect", or R2P, as it is commonly known. This provides that when a state manifestly fails to protect its own people collective action may be authorised by the Security Council and international intervention may take place, up to and including the use of force. Advocates of R2P were encouraged that the early Security Council Resolution 1970 on Libya

# Was the International Intervention in Libya a Success?

Written by Michael Aaronson

referred to the Libyan government's "responsibility to protect" its own people and SCR 1973 used similar language; by implication, the action that was authorised fell under the R2P heading. And indeed, in many ways the Libyan situation fell into the category envisaged by R2P's architects – although the suddenness with which the crisis emerged was unusual and meant decisions had to be taken with more haste than the system is perhaps designed to handle. However the way the campaign has played out – and in particular the different approach taken to other potential R2P interventions in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, has meant that R2P has certainly not been strengthened by Libya and may even have been weakened by it. Many will feel that these cases show that Great Power politics is still the determining factor in whether any intervention to prevent mass atrocities takes place, rather than that a new norm is emerging.

Militarily, although not without controversy in terms of, for example, the scrapping of the UK's sole remaining aircraft carrier as part of the Strategic Defence Review, the campaign was clearly a success for US and other NATO militaries. Most significantly, it may mark a return to the belief that intervention mainly from the air based on vastly superior weaponry, in support of an indigenous uprising, is a relatively safe and assured way of bringing about regime change. This doctrine took a knock after the failures in Afghanistan, but was seen to work in Libya. Thus, to quote Joe Biden again: "this is more of the prescription for how to deal with the world as we go forward than it has been in the past". However, a largely untold story in the Libya campaign is the role of Special Forces on the ground, which may have been quite significant. In addition Libya and Afghanistan are very different countries posing quite different issues in campaign terms; what works in one context may not in another. To quote Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr: "*Great cases like hard cases make bad law. For great cases are called great, not by reason of their importance... but because of some accident of immediate overwhelming interest which appeals to the feelings and distorts the judgment*".

Perhaps only time will tell whether Libya turns out to have been a great case of international intervention or something rather less.

*Sir Michael Aaronson is a Professorial Research Fellow and Co-Director of cij – the Centre for International Intervention – at the University of Surrey in Guildford in the UK. Contact via: [m.aaronson@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:m.aaronson@surrey.ac.uk)  
@MikeAaronson; @cij\_surrey*

---

## About the author:

**Professor Sir Michael Aaronson** was Director General (chief executive) of Save the Children UK from 1995-2005, and from 1988-1995 was the charity's Overseas Director. He first joined Save the Children in 1969, spending two years as a relief worker in Nigeria after reading philosophy and psychology at St John's College, Oxford. Between 1972 and 1988 he held various posts in the UK Diplomatic Service, serving in London, Paris, Lagos, and Rangoon. He is a founder member, and from 2001-2008 was Chair of the Board, of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based private foundation working to improve the international response to conflict, in particular through independent mediation. Since January 2004 he has been a Visiting Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. In September 2008 he was appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor and in May 2011 a Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey, where he is also Co-Director of cij – the Centre for International Intervention. He is a Senior Adviser to NATO, working on the political/military aspects of NATO transformation, and is an occasional lecturer at the UK Defence Academy on civil/military collaboration in conflict situations.