

Field Report: Lessons from Libya

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety. Libyan activist-turned-business consultant Khaled el Mayet knows not everyone shares his view of what happened in Libya. But for him, the most important measure is how little fear is felt on the streets of Tripoli now compared with a year ago, or with the forty-two years of Ghaddafi rule before that.

"It was a great success," says el Mayet. "It was very much needed and the Libyan people were very appreciative for the action NATO took."

The 28-year-old el Mayet grew up in London, a life that was outwardly comfortable, but emotionally on edge as his family, friends, and his own sense of self were split between Britain and Libya.

As the early sprouts in Libya's "Spring" were being crushed by the Ghaddafi regime, he and other members of the Libyan diaspora sent humanitarian assistance, desperately hoping for international protection for those resisting the regime.

"Everyone was so scared," he says. "We all saw that radio speech from Ghaddafi where he said. 'We're coming for you. We're going to hunt you down one by one like rats in your cupboards, zanqa zanqa.'"

The phrase "zanqa zanqa" – Arabic for "alleyway by alleyway" – would become a catchphrase, even a jingle for the opposition. But at the moment the Libyan leader issued the threat in February 2011, it was a death notice.

El Mayet actually thinks that language helped convince permanent U.N. Security Council members Russia and China to abstain in a March 17th vote, rather than veto resolution 1973, which authorized "all necessary means" to protect Libyan civilians.

El Mayet says, of watching the vote, "A tear came down from my eye because I was so relieved something was going to get done. What felt like a couple of moments later—it might have been a couple of hours, I can't remember—the French are suddenly blowing up this huge army that was rolling into Benghazi. That was one of the best moments. It really was! The excitement through all the Libyan people at that time."

It was actually two days later that the United States, Britain, and France began airstrikes on Ghaddafi forces that were about to enter the opposition stronghold of Benghazi.

Benghazi residents had been told by Ghaddafi they would get "no mercy" when he came to kill them. [That] plan was foiled at the last moment by the Western attacks which were met with enormous relief by Benghazi residents and welcomed by celebratory gunshots.

Under fire back in Washington for getting involved in Libya while tied up in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Obama knew he needed to convince his own war-weary citizens to support the initiative he himself had been lukewarm about in the beginning.

At the time, President Obama said, "Left unchecked, we have every reason to believe Ghaddafi would commit atrocities against his people. Many thousands could die. A humanitarian crisis would ensue. The entire region could be destabilized, endangering many of our allies and partners."

But Mr. Obama also made clear to allies that the US did not want to maintain the lead role in this operation. In a little more than one week, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced the 28-member alliance would take over command of Operation Unified Protector.

There are critics who say NATO did far more than the mandate allowed. The Russian and Chinese governments hadn't actually voted for the resolution—just vetoed it.

Moscow was particularly vocal about its perception that NATO operations were going beyond protecting civilians. Russia's acting ambassador to NATO, Nikolay Korchunov said, "[The] alliance openly supported one of the parties and acted as if the resolution was the legal base (sic) for facilitating regime change. It wasn't obvious from the very beginning, but those who planned it had that in mind."

Martin Butcher, an arms-control advocate who authors a blog called "NATO Monitor" is even more blunt. He says while he supported the initial military intervention to save Benghazi under the UN's norm of

"responsibility to protect," he believes that concept was stretched to the breaking point by the ambitions of certain allies.

"NATO acted as the air wing of the rebels," says Bucher, "rather than as a neutral UN force. I don't think NATO as an alliance went in with a conscious policy of regime change. I do think, although I can't prove with documentary evidence, the UK and France went in wanting to overthrow Ghaddafi. They pushed the bounds and the NATO allies didn't push back."

US ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder vigorously disputes any suggestion NATO chose the outcome of the conflict. He says the fate of Moammar Ghaddafi was in the hands of Moammar Ghaddafi.

"On day two," says Daalder, "he could've stopped the attacks and taken his forces and put them back in the barracks. He would've remained in control and the NATO operation would've ended."

Because the Libyan leader kept on fighting for almost eight months, the opposition had time and space to organize and advance under NATO cover. During that period, France also decided—unilaterally—to give arms to the rebels, giving ammunition to critics who questioned how that could be justified while the alliance was in charge of enforcing an arms embargo.

Faced with these questions, Daalder's answer doesn't change.

"NATO acted within its mandate," says Daalder. "It did so on day one and it did so until the last day—222 days later—when this operation ended with civilians protected against a regime that was no longer attacking it. We do not believe we changed or altered or expanded or in any way went over the mandate that the U.N. Security Council in resolution 1973 voted on. We have a fundamental difference with Russia and China over this issue."

Recently a classified NATO report on "Lessons Learned in Libya" was leaked. The shortcomings cited don't surprise anyone who's heard US speeches to the allies in recent years, complaining about the disproportionate reliance on US capabilities and resources.

In Operation Unified Protector, that meant a lack of experienced target analysts for precision bombings and of intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance aircraft. For example, even with the US contribution, the alliance had only about forty percent of the electronic-interception aircraft it would have needed.

Author and former German diplomat Dieter Dettke says Europe needs to get it together. "Without the US, Europe could not have done it. That should be the most important lesson to learn: that Europe needs to focus on its own capabilities. That's a big issue and a large question."

Frank internal assessment since the Libyan operation ended October 31st have prodded NATO allies into purchasing their first aerial surveillance system: five Global Hawk drones produced by Northrop Grumman. Efforts to establish the first European air-to-air refueling fleet have begun. Daalder feels it's a good start.

"The challenge for NATO is to not only do that in one or two areas, but that we also maintain the investment in our defense capabilities here in Europe. Down the road, NATO could maintain the ability to fairly share in the burden to conduct military operations. That's a question that can't be answered today but will require continued investment today to remain capable tomorrow and the day after."

Martin Butcher says Daalder's positive assessment is too narrowly focused on military aspects, which did largely go well. Butcher says "lessons learned" must include what he feels is political fallout from the Libyan experience—guaranteed resistance at the very least. In the UN Security Council, the next time some countries call for the responsibility to protect, others hear only "regime change."

The Syrian situation in particular is already demonstrating such difficulties. Butcher asks, "Where does the UN go from here with a concept that has been damaged by what happened in Libya but in some circumstances is an essential concept and something the UN should be able to do? NATO should be looking at that. The UN should be looking at that and saying how can we learn lessons from this and not repeat those mistakes."

Back in London, Khaled el Mayet's Libya looks bright. His brother Ibrahim has moved back to Tripoli and they have started "I-E Consultancy" for the many companies wanting to get in on the Libyan market.

"We're seeing great things," says el Mayet. "There's so much ambition and hope from the Libyan people. The young people in particular are very excited about potentially having a good life and they'll do everything they can to try to embrace that."

– *Reported by Teri Schultz for America Abroad*