

Libya's Arab Spring: What lessons for the EU?

Stefan Wolff

stefan@stefanwolff.com | www.stefanwolff.com | [@stefwolff](https://twitter.com/stefwolff)

After more than 25,000 sorties and close to 10,000 airstrikes between March and October 2011, [NATO](#) wound down its operation in Libya by the end of October. [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 itself did not play any significant role. Clearly constrained (and distracted) 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 were made available for short-term stabilisation needs, as well as a further €60million for assistance in the transition process. Intended to 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 impact of these measures is yet to be seen. As the situation in Libya remains highly volatile, with [weak government authority and capacity, competing visions of the future structure of the country](#), and repeated [violent clashes between rival militia groups](#) the EU's actual capacity to effect positive change in its southern neighbourhood remains in doubt. At the same time, the EU has reaffirmed its [commitment](#) to addressing the [regionally destabilising fall-out](#) from the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime through its [Sahel Strategy](#) of March 2011.

The EU's military embarrassment to one side, this apparently inability to achieve objectives that are central to Union's neighbourhood policy is, on the one hand, quite surprising. The Union does have substantial experience and a positive track record in [crisis management missions and operations](#) 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, 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. While the level of success varies from case to case, none of these missions have been unmitigated disasters and many have contributed to increased, and 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. Thus, the EU possesses the necessary capabilities to play a role in crisis management, but the effectiveness of these capabilities on the ground also depends very much on the context in which they are brought to bear.

The statement by the [High Representative](#) following the fall of Sirte and the death of Gadhafi clearly indicated 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.

The fact that the EU's impact in Libya to date remains below expectations, in my view, has partly also to do with the nature of these expectations: neither was it a foregone conclusion that a post-Gadhafi Libya would be stable and secure nor that the EU could immediately work towards supporting Libya's transition to democracy or that it would find reliable local partners to do so. 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. Yet, this requires a level of security and stability on the ground to be in place that the EU only rarely is able to provide on its own. In the absence of strong international security partners or a capable government in the country concerned, this is a sobering (if not frustrating) lesson to learn from the EU's involvement in Libya. At another level, it is worth remembering that dictatorial regimes are defeated on the battlefield, but stable democracies emerge over long periods of time from societies that are built on strong and legitimate institutions. Thus, the EU's 'skill set' may yet come to be in demand in Libya, and if it does it will be required for the long term.