

The American Conservative

NATO's Impossible Task

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On April 6, 2011 @ 9:07 am In

The top general for Libya's rebels lashed out at NATO forces for not doing enough against Libyan leader Moammar Kadafi and threatened to take his complaint to the U.N. Security Council.

"I would like to say to you people that NATO did not provide to us what we need," Abdul Fatah Younis said at a news conference in the rebel capital, Benghazi. ~[The Los Angeles Times](#) ^[1]

Younis' complaint is valid up to a point. The official justification for attacking Libya is to protect the civilian population, the civilian population in Misurata is suffering from the ongoing civil war as Gaddafi's forces attack Misurata, and NATO has had difficulty halting these attacks. Because the official justification for attacking Libya is the protection of civilians, NATO has adopted extremely restrictive rules of engagement that have prevented air strikes on Gaddafi's forces in built-up urban areas where the chances of civilian deaths are greatly increased. The ideological reason for intervening in Libya makes it impossible for NATO to take actions that the Libyan rebels demand the Alliance take, and the serious political opposition within NATO to the entire enterprise seems likely to ensure that the restrictive rules of engagement are not going to be loosened.

According to a [report](#) ^[2] in The Daily Telegraph, *three-quarters* of sorties on Monday had to return without launching any strikes because Gaddafi's tanks had taken up positions in civilian areas. Well, that is exactly what one would expect him to do when NATO's purpose is supposed to be preventing civilian deaths, since NATO's reason for attacking Libya would be fairly quickly discredited if NATO strikes directly caused significant numbers of civilian deaths. Ultimately, Younis' complaint is based on the apparent belief that NATO should be intervening to aid the rebel cause, rather than to prevent mass killing.

The new analogy of choice these days is to call Misurata a Libyan Sarajevo. Of course, Sarajevo suffered from being a besieged city and a war zone, which is unfortunately what sometimes happens in wars. The prolongation of the Libyan conflict by outside intervention has encouraged the rebels such that they continue to make maximalist demands, and they are refusing any cease-fire that does not achieve their final political objective. Intervention may have simply [prevented the end](#) ^[3] of most of the fighting in Libya, and by preventing that U.S. and allied forces are partly responsible for prolonging a conflict that could end up consuming many more lives as it drags on indefinitely.

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[1] The Los Angeles Times: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-libya-fighting-20110406,0,1620120.story>

[2] report: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8430496/Libya-Nato-to-ask-RAF-to-contribute-more-warplanes.html>

[3] prevented the end: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/interests-values-are-different-5112>

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