

# Navigating Post-Revolution and Intervention Challenges in Libya: Implications for Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and the Imperative for Evolving Foreign Policy Frameworks in the SWANA Region

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## **Abstract**

The politics of interventionism have for long been a topic of discussion. In the case of Libya, the 2011 Arab Uprisings have had a particularly outstanding outcome, with a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-backed intervention toppling the one-man authoritarian rule of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya's 42-year leader. Clearly, the toppling of a regime and the transition to another have carried implications on the Libyan economy and global foreign policy, with women being at its forefront. This policy paper explores the impact that the NATO-led humanitarian intervention that aimed to topple Gaddafi's rule has had on Libyan women's peace and security. The methodology relies on the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to assess the current situation, and to scrutinize the NATO and EU's current approach to foreign policy. The paper finds that the current approach is in need of reform, which may be achieved through the lens of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) that relies upon the principles of non-interventionism and anti-colonialism.

## Introduction

In 2011, Libya stood as a beacon of hope in Africa, boasting the highest Human Development Index on the continent (Mamdani, 2011). Underpinning this progress were constitutional guarantees of women's rights and the enactment of progressive legislation. However, despite these legal provisions, Libyan women encountered formidable cultural and social barriers that stifled their political engagement, exacerbated by the government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, which systematically marginalized their participation in civic life. This reality, in addition to constant and considerable infringements on political freedoms and rights, made Libya a fertile land for the Arab Spring that engulfed the whole region.

Amidst this backdrop, women emerged as indispensable agents of change, playing a pivotal role in the revolutionary movement that eventually toppled Gaddafi's rule. However, despite achieving their goal the proceeding vacuum and chaos gave way to violence where armed factions, supported by various foreign governments, vied for control. As a result, the nation plunged into a protracted and bloody conflict, leaving many to look on Gaddafi's reign with nostalgia and rose-tinted glasses, harkening back to an era where the government provided citizens with stability and essentials.

Indeed, the situation in Libya post-Gaddafi can only be described as a political, social, economic, and humanitarian disaster, especially compared to its condition under his rule (Fetouri, 2023). The Gaddafi regime was overthrown by a NATO coalition that provided military aid and aerial support to multiple rebel factions solely based on their opposition to Gaddafi. NATO intervened under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle and UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Initially seen as a humanitarian and successful intervention, it is now evident that NATO contributed to chaos, significantly more so than to peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts. This is apparent through various metrics indicating the deterioration of the situation for Libyan individuals across all sectors, particularly affecting women, migrants, and minorities. Libyan GDP has contracted by upward of 60% in the last decade. Furthermore, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 570,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Libya, along with over 47,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in the country. Violence, meanwhile, continues to resurge (Human Rights Council, 2023).

This paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of Libya's post-intervention socio-economic landscape, with a particular emphasis on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework. Through a meticulous synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data, coupled with a comparative analysis of pre- and post-Gaddafi Libya, the study seeks to study the impact of NATO's intervention on human rights and gender equality. Central to this analysis is a nuanced exploration of the underlying motives behind the intervention and its far-reaching ramifications for the region. The paper critically examines the continued failure of traditional peacekeeping efforts and underscores the deleterious effects of external interference and geopolitical rivalries on Libya's fragile statehood.

Therefore, the paper proposes a revised framework for future foreign policy, which is centered on two primary approaches: Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and Non-Interventionism/Strategic Independence. In particular, FFP is a diplomatic strategy that integrates policies and practices to promote gender equality in how countries and entities interact with one another on the international scale. It was developed and coined by Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister Margot Wallstrom (D., 2018; Radio France, 2020). While these approaches are comprehensive, they do not purport to serve as a definitive guide to resolving all foreign policy issues. Nonetheless, they are poised to alleviate the current situation and mitigate the risk of a recurrence of the events in Libya.

## Methodology

This paper advocates for novel foreign policy frameworks and offers recommendations through a critical analysis that synthesizes various research findings. It examines the present state of affairs in Libya and scrutinizes the policy choices of foreign actors, particularly the United States, European Union, and NATO, which have contributed to the current failed situation.

### Rationale for Methodology

The literature review relies almost equally on qualitative and quantitative research for several reasons. First, the frequent use of quantitative data allows us to capture and effectively analyze the size and degree of failure in Libya and understand the issues plaguing efforts to improve peace and security in the region. Additionally, it allows us to undergo a comparative analysis of the situation pre and post-intervention in Libya and identify how each stakeholder was affected. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is utilized to understand the policy decisions that have led to the current situation in Libya. Also, qualitative data such as news reports and interviews help us to accurately capture the overall situation and feel in the country.

Furthermore, it is important to utilize qualitative data to propose recommendations by reviewing different foreign policy practices and choosing the ones that would be the most effective in ameliorating the current situation. In addition, the use of both qualitative and quantitative research hand-in-hand allows for understanding the nuanced dynamics and nature of the modern foreign policy landscape, run on hegemonic principles. Moreover, invoking a corpus of literature on Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and other case studies on the failures of foreign interventions enhances our learning of the flaws of perception and goals that lead to the issue at hand (Nylund et al., 2022).

### Synthesis and Policy Recommendations

This paper synthesizes qualitative and quantitative data collected to critically assess the shortcomings of the international community in evaluating and resolving the Libyan crisis. By drawing on diverse perspectives and rigorous analysis, we develop comprehensive and impactful policy recommendations that aim to address the issue holistically, considering the needs of all stakeholders.

## Literature Review

### The Crisis

The situation in Libya has been described almost unanimously by international human rights groups, and other national and international actors as a

humanitarian and political disaster. Over the past 13 years, Libya has gone through numerous governments, often two or more at a time ruling over parts of the country and plunging it deeper into civil war. Constant and overlapping upheaval has followed, characterized by international military intervention and interchanging periods of war and uneasy, short-lived peace. Constant peace-making attempts have been conducted but none have been able to result in sustainable conflict resolution (Fernández-Molina, 2023). Against this backdrop of deepening political fragmentation and complete dissolution of the line that separates the state from non-state actors, a humanitarian crisis has emerged. At one point, an estimated 1,600 different armed groups were operating in Libya, including the Islamic State which controlled vast swaths of territory (Rowan, 2019).

This culminated in almost 1.3 million people in Libya requiring humanitarian assistance, of which around 348,000 are minors. In addition, almost 393,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have lived in makeshift camps since 2011 after fleeing the violence (International Civil Society Organization, 2021). This is further exacerbated by a constant influx of migrants into the country who are trying to get to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. According to the report of the International Civil Society Organization (2021), around 43,000 refugees and asylum seekers who mainly come from sub-Saharan Africa currently reside in Libya, and most take the often-deadly journey by boat to reach Italy. The tightened immigration policy of the EU, along with Italy's and the EU's support and funding of the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) to capture, return, and repel refugees, has led to concerning reports from organizations such as Amnesty International and UNHCR.

These reports highlight the dire situation faced by refugees and migrants in Libya, including being held in detention centers, drowning, and falling victim to trafficking. Accounts from these reports detail harrowing experiences, with refugees suffering or witnessing a range of abuses including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture, ill-treatment, rape, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, and forced labor (UNHCR | Canada, n.d.). The latter actions aren't limited to state actors but non-state ones as well, in an environment best described as "total impunity" (Amnesty International, 2020, para. 2).

On the other hand, the political life in Libya is marred by constant violations and human rights abuses. The country has not voted in an election since 2014 due to constant frictions and disagreements (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The judicial system is weak and many international human rights organizations have raised legitimate concerns on due process issues in Libya's legal system. Authorities in both the east and west of the country have been cracking down on civic groups and at times persecuting staff members of NGOs (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In relation to WPS, adding to the aforementioned violence and humanitarian disasters, women face high levels of discrimination in Libya, today more than ever. Last year, the Tripoli Security Agency, a body tied to the Government of National Unity (GNU), began requiring Libyan women traveling without a male escort to complete forms and undergo questioning for the reasons of present and past travel history (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Libya's family code doesn't

protect against domestic violence, honor killings, and marital rape. Punishments such as flogging are still in use in the country. Libyan law requires women to get the authorities' permission before marrying a non-Libyan man (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

To fully grasp the current crisis in Libya, it's crucial to contextualize it with the situation before the 2011 revolution and NATO intervention. Libya under Gaddafi, despite its flaws, enjoyed the highest human development index in Africa (Mamdani, 2011). The government provided or supported citizens with essential needs such as housing, education, electricity, and interest-free loans. Over a million foreign workers sought opportunities in Libya, attesting to its relative prosperity. Gaddafi's government initiated ambitious projects like the Great Man-Made River (GMR), the world's largest irrigation endeavor, ensuring access to water for Libyan households. Contrasting this initiative with recent government negligence leading to flooding, which claimed thousands of lives and displaced many, highlights the stark decline in Libya's situation over the past decade as "the Decade's Most Worsened Country" (Taft, 2020). The comparison underscores how Libya today is significantly worse off than it was thirteen years ago.

While Western powers, particularly NATO, cited human rights violations to justify intervention, Libya's human rights situation right now is notably worse than under Gaddafi according to numerous sources. The independent UN fact-finding mission probe, released on March 27, 2023, expressed "deep concern over the country's deteriorating human rights situation in its final report today, concluding there are grounds to believe a wide array of war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed by State security forces and armed militia groups" (Human Rights Council, 2023, para. 1). The report further detailed accounts of rape, torture, and slavery in the country. The majority of the current acting forces in Libya implicated in these crimes include Libya's Deterrence Apparatus for Combating Organized Crime and Terrorism (DACOT), the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), the Internal Security Agency (ISA), and the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA).

Thus, Libya is arguably a failed state and the NATO intervention, though it managed to achieve its goal of deposing Gaddafi, has failed to provide an alternative to maintain peace and stability in the country and the region as a whole. Although the NATO intervention happened under the R2P framework, these protections haven't materialized for the Libyan populace. It can be concluded from the current situation that the international community's efforts concerning Libya have not achieved the desired outcomes, raising an imperative to change foreign policy and increase cooperation between states. The latter would not only address the immediate situation, but would also prevent it from happening in the future. Therefore, we should first identify the missteps leading to the current position and highlight solutions for better foreign policy.

### **History and Development of the Current Crisis**

It is elementary to contextualize the current state of affairs in Libya to better understand the situation, effectively identify stakeholders, and understand the issues that lead to the current situation.

### Timeline

#### Gaddafi's Rule (1969–2011)

- Colonel Muammar Al Gaddafi seized power in a coup in 1969, establishing rule based on socialist and pan-Arabist ideologies.
- Gaddafi faced constant pressure and sanctions from the US and Western nations due to his government's support of pan-African and pan-Arabist liberation movements in Africa and the Middle East (Mejia-Prieto, 2019–2020). Gaddafi was also reprimanded for the nationalization of Libya's oil supplies in 1970, forcing all foreign troops to depart from the country (The Oil Drum, 2011).
- Libya's economy relied almost completely on oil wealth (World Bank, n.d.).

#### The 2011 Uprising and NATO Intervention

- February 2011: Inspired by the Arab Spring protests, Libyans began demonstrations demanding reform and Gaddafi's ousting.
- March 2011: Gaddafi responded with violence, escalating the situation into a civil war.
- March 17, 2011: The UN Security Council passed UNSCR 1973, authorizing "all necessary measures" to protect civilians and impose a no-fly zone (United Nations Security Council, 2011).
- March 19, 2011: A NATO-led coalition launched airstrikes against Gaddafi's forces, effectively tipping the balance in favor of the rebels (NATO, 2011).
- October 2011: Gaddafi's forces were defeated, and he was assassinated (Stephen & Beaumont, 2017).

#### Post-Gaddafi Chaos (2011–Present)

Power struggles erupted among rebel factions, leading to ongoing instability and violence. Two rival governments emerged:

- Government of National Accord (GNA): Formed in 2015 under UN auspices, it's a fragile coalition of various political and militia groups. It has struggled to assert control outside Tripoli and faces internal divisions. This government is supported by troops sent by Turkey (Allahoum, 2020).
- Libyan National Army (LNA): Led by General Khalifa Haftar, a former Gaddafi military official, the LNA controls eastern Libya and some southern regions. Haftar launched an offensive in 2014 to capture Tripoli, leading to ongoing conflict. The LNA is supported by the UAE and other actors (Allahoum, 2020). Both the GNA and LNA rely on armed militias, often with competing agendas, further complicating efforts at stability.

According to Malloy and Treyz (2016), Barack Obama described the Libyan intervention as his worst mistake in office, in "failing to plan for the day after what I think was the right thing to do in intervening in Libya" (para. 2); he has added that "all of us – including the United States – could have done more in the aftermath of the Libyan intervention" (para. 11). This sentiment arises from the recognition that while the NATO intervention achieved its primary goal of toppling the Gaddafi government, the long-term consequences have left the US and EU in a worse

position. For example, the EU has regarded the migration crisis in Libya as an issue of high concern (Eljarh, n.d.). Furthermore, the international community has been trying for years to achieve a stable Libya whether through the unsuccessful Berlin Conference in 2020 and other short-lived peacemaking attempts (ReliefWeb, 2021).

France and the UK, spearheading the Libyan invasion that led to Gaddafi's ousting, failed to adequately plan for the vacuum created afterward, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that now threatens the EU's borders. Presently, a nation that was once among Africa's richest now heavily relies on EU aid for survival. In exchange for this aid, the EU delegates the burden of handling migrants to the Libyan authorities and security apparatus. Western nations, despite backing regime change, have neglected to provide crucial support to post-Gaddafi governments, contributing to the current state of fragmentation (Fenton-Harvey, 2020).

Therefore, while the NATO intervention initially appeared as a swift and easy success, as evidenced by the victory lap taken by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary David Cameron in Libya back in 2011, the long-term consequences have failed to fulfill the protections promised to the Libyan population. Libyan women remain as vulnerable as ever, if not in a worse position.

### Stakeholders

Now that the causes that led to Libya's current fragile situation have been explained, there is a multitude of stakeholders that are relevant in the context we are describing. They represent a range of interests and perspectives. Here are some key stakeholders:

1. Libyan Women and Minorities

Disenfranchised communities are usually the most directly affected by the country's troubled political, social, and economic dynamics. Therefore, it is of the utmost priority that they have a central role in decision-making processes and policies that impact their livelihood in a future Libya.

2. Government Agencies

Domestic, Arab, and international entities have a common stake in promoting stability, human rights, and overall development in Libya. Additionally, learning from the Libyan experience and developing new and improved foreign policy approaches will provide a benchmark for future international and regional efforts to promote peace.

3. NATO and the UN

The UN and NATO have played integral roles in the situation in Libya from 2011 onwards, making it crucial to reassess the policy decisions taken and to reevaluate their responses. Moreover, it's important to learn from the current situation both in terms of providing aid and in dealing with similar issues in the future.

#### 4. Refugees and Immigrants

The situation in Libya for refugees is dire, and multiple human rights organizations report on continuous human rights violations towards these refugees. Therefore, it proves important to prioritize their immediate protection in any policy choice in the future.

Tertiary stakeholders include the Libyan Civil Society Organizations, Diplomatic Missions and Foreign Aid Donors, Private Sector and Business Community, and Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. Furthermore, it is important to identify spoilers that will stand in the way of implementing the necessary changes in foreign policy toward Libya:

##### 1. Political Meddling

Conflicting interests of nations and parties are leading to meddling in Libyan affairs which is plunging the country into deeper violence. Over the past decade, multiple countries have been waging proxy wars through Libya (Allahoum, 2020), which, in turn, is delaying and halting all forms of peace talks.

##### 2. Militant/Terrorist Groups

Hundreds of different armed militias and terrorist groups currently call Libya home and continue to perpetuate war and violence in the nation and the region as a whole (National Counterterrorism Center, 2023).

#### Solutions

Building on the previous analysis, a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), if applied correctly with regional, cultural, and socio-economic considerations, holds significant promise for both improving the current situation in Libya and establishing an important benchmark for future international diplomacy, foreign policy, and governance. While each country has its definition of FFP, the essential ingredient to any working definition of FFP is “intersectionality.” It defines how states should interact with each other and amongst themselves in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality, and human rights. Additionally, FFP seeks to disrupt colonial and patriarchal structures that plague the modern world (Australian Coalition for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2022). Though it holds great merit in itself, an improved and customized FFP structure should be adopted, in Libya in particular, along the SWANA region, and in the developing world as a whole. Therefore, foreign policy in the region should be:

##### 1. Anti-Imperialist & Anti-Colonial

It is essential to reject external interventions that prioritize resource extraction or strategic dominance over the needs and aspirations of the local population. Decisions ought to be made in partnership with local actors, respecting their sovereignty and self-determination. Also, restitution actions toward former colonies should be taken to ensure future development and global growth.



## 2. Intersectional & Equal

Promoting equal rights and opportunities for all genders would be at the core of a policy that advocates for intersectionality and equality – in a way that acknowledges the specific challenges faced by women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and religious minorities within tribal and cultural contexts.

## 3. Non-Interventionist & Non-Violent

Non-interventionist and non-violent approaches advocate for the international community to respect the sovereignty of every nation and its right to self-governance. This entails opposing the use of military force, whether through direct intervention or by supporting proxies, to prevent humanitarian disasters and ongoing violence, as witnessed in Libya today. Instead, emphasis should be placed on diplomatic solutions to address these issues (Nylund et al., 2022). Policy should refrain from gender washing and intervening in the affairs of local communities with gender as a pretext, such as in the example of Afghanistan (Cocosatu, 2012). This, and the aforementioned policy recommendations, indicate the following key areas of focus for further consideration.

## 4. Peacemaking, Building & Conflict Resolution

Peacemaking, building, and conflict resolution entail employing bottom-up approaches that engage all segments of society in every stage of diplomacy, ensuring a sustainable and equitable peace for all. Supporting women-led peacebuilding initiatives is crucial, as they often address the root causes of conflict, including poverty, resource scarcity, and political exclusion. This can be achieved by fostering dialogue and reconciliation processes among various tribal groups, as well as civic and community organizations.

## 5. Inclusive Economic Growth

This approach prioritizes developing economies holistically and in the long term, addressing both immediate needs and future prosperity. Economic diversification is key, reducing reliance on foreign aid and fostering a robust mix of industries. By investing in programs that create economic opportunities for women, communities will be more resilient and empowered to face challenges.

## 6. Protecting Human Rights

The international community must prioritize the protection of human rights in all its foreign policy endeavors. In the specific case of Libya, this translates to unwavering support for initiatives that safeguard refugees and combat impunity. Any potential policy must ensure the safety and well-being of refugees and migrants, upholding their fundamental rights and advocating for humane treatment. It must also address the pervasive

human rights violations by holding perpetrators accountable and supporting mechanisms for justice and reconciliation. Finally, for a policy to be effective, it must be culturally sensitive, pursuing solutions with respect to local customs and traditions. This necessitates close cooperation with local partners, ensuring their voices and perspectives are central to the decision-making process.

### Conclusion

The case study of NATO's intervention in Libya elucidates the failure of traditional peacekeeping efforts and further highlights the need to reform the incumbent foreign policy concerning Africa and the SWANA region. The paper demonstrated that although NATO's intervention effectively dismantled Colonel Gaddafi's rule, it created a political vacuum that paved the way for the emergence of radical groups and armed militias, and for the deep fragmentation of the country. Libya went from being the African country with the highest Human Development Index to a war-torn, failed state that drives millions of refugees into foreign territories every year. Clearly, the swift de-development of the state led to women being in a worse position, with the issue of women's rights and prosperity becoming an almost extinct topic of discussion amid extreme poverty and radicalism. The intervention also underscored two important questions concerning the ethical justification of foreign interventions, mainly regarding whether the desired end justifies the employed means, and whether the removal of disfavored or authoritarian leaders is worth creating irreparable harm within the concerned nation.

That said, several solutions were proposed, among which are the principles of a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) that, in policy design and implementation, would foreground intersectionality and the principles of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and human rights. Cultural sensitivity and the consideration of one's culture must also be accounted for in any measure relating to foreign policy development in the region. Furthermore, more research is imperative to be able to tailor FFP frameworks to the unique context of Libya and similar cases, ensuring that informed dialogue, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation serve as the primary tools for resolving conflicts.

To claim that a Feminist Foreign Policy is a panacea for all the challenges in modern foreign policy is overly simplistic. However, it does hold promise in improving the situation for all stakeholders involved. A policy centered on peace and women's empowerment can significantly reduce the toll of war. A stable Libya, long sought by the international community, promises benefits not only for its citizens but also for Europe's border security and regional trade. More importantly, stability in Libya would advance human rights and dismantle the barriers of discrimination against women in the country. These solutions also lay the groundwork for future integrative and inclusive policies on a global scale.

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