

Libya Conflict: Weekly Recap

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Unintended Casualties

NATO warplanes executed two separate airstrikes this week that left more than twenty civilians dead in and around the capital city of Tripoli. Nine people, including several children, were killed Sunday when a missile struck an apartment building in Tripoli's populous Souk Juma district. ([Post](#)) NATO officials initially acknowledged responsibility for the strike, releasing a statement admitting that "there may have been a weapons system failure which may have caused a number of civilian casualties." However, on Wednesday the New York Times reported that the explosion may have been caused by a Libyan SA-6 surface-to-air missile launched from the site NATO jets were bombing. ([NYT](#)) The neighborhood, a residential area containing a secondary school, is reported to be one of the few areas of the capital city that openly protested the Qaddafi regime during the beginning stages of the conflict in late February. ([LAT](#)) Regime officials were quick to use the bombing for propaganda purposes, busing international journalists to the scene and characterizing civilian casualties from NATO airstrikes as having shifted from "collateral damage" to "direct hits." ([LAT](#))

The following morning, NATO airstrikes destroyed a luxury compound outside of Tripoli owned by Khoweldi Hamedi, a high-ranking regime official who had been part of the 1969 coup that brought Qaddafi to power. ([AFP](#)) Hamedi himself survived the strike, though fifteen people believed to be family members – several of whom were children – were killed. NATO officials described Monday's airstrike, which occurred forty miles west of Tripoli in the town of Surman, as "a precision strike on a legitimate military target," but also expressed regret for "any loss of civilian life." ([LAT](#)) Hamedi is reported to be a Major-General in the regime who led a brutal crackdown in the western town of Zawiya in late February. ([AP](#)) Close ties to Qaddafi extend to Hamedi's family; one of his daughter's is reportedly

married to Qaddafi's son Saadi.

Finally, there were also isolated reports that NATO jets mistakenly bombed a rebel convoy near Brega in eastern Libya this past Thursday. ([Al Jazeera](#), [LAT](#)) NATO spokesmen released a statement expressing regret for the loss of life, but did not release any details regarding casualties. This would be the fourth incident of friendly fire during the conflict.

Dissent within the Ranks

The international coalition supporting the NATO air campaign showed signs of internal divisions this week after European leaders argued over the best way forward. On Sunday, the head of an influential Italian political party called for the end of Italian involvement in Libya. ([WSJ](#)) The comments by Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League and an important political ally of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, were followed by a speech on Wednesday by Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, who called for "an immediate humanitarian suspension of hostilities" to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid. ([Post](#), [BBC](#)) In response, the French government – whose participation in the NATO mission far outstrips that of Italy – issued a statement resisting such a pause, claiming that halting military operations "would allow [Libyan leader] Muammar Gaddafi to gain time and reorganize." ([BBC](#)) However, opposition to the military operations extends beyond Europe, as the head of the Arab League also urged for a ceasefire in order to negotiate a political solution to the conflict. ([Guardian](#))

Uncertainty about the viability of the bombing campaign has even reached the United Kingdom, where a public disagreement has emerged between Prime Minister David Cameron and some top military officials. During the last week, both the second-in-command of the Royal Air Force and the head of the Royal Navy have publicly expressed concern that sustained military operations in Libya are putting a strain on the British military. ([BBC](#), [Guardian](#)) Cameron chastised the military leaders in a Tuesday press conference, stating that "There are times when I wake up and read the newspapers and think, 'I tell you what, you do the fighting and I'll do the talking.'" ([NYT](#))

Political Turmoil at Home

Congressional disagreement over U.S. involvement in the Libyan conflict has grown this

week as the White House has resisted invoking the War Powers Act and obtaining Congressional authorization for ongoing operations. Both houses of Congress introduced resolutions approving of the continuation of the current mission for another year. ([LAT](#))

Though the bill in the Senate – introduced by Senator John McCain and Senator John Kerry – could be passed, House Republicans have indicated that they would vote down such a resolution. The Republican leadership in the House of Representatives introduced a second measure that authorizes a more restricted mission: it would prohibit “the use of money for military activities other than search and rescue; aerial refueling; operational planning; and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance — essentially requiring an end to direct American combat activity like missile strikes.” ([NYT](#), [Reuters](#))

Debate over U.S. involvement escalated after Republican leaders were unconvinced by the legal justification for ignoring the War Powers Act contained in a White House report. ([Post](#)) The Obama administration has sought to portray U.S. forces as uninvolved in hostilities, a description somewhat undermined by reports that U.S. jets have attacked Libyan air defenses about 60 times in addition to roughly 30 strikes by drones on Libyan forces. ([NYT](#))

New Drone Crashes

The wreckage of an unmanned helicopter drone was found in Libya on Tuesday. Libyan state news agencies claimed that it had been shot down by Libyan armed forces near Zliten, about 160 km east of Tripoli. ([Al Jazeera](#)) NATO confirmed that the drone had gone down along the coastline in central Libya, but did not discuss the circumstances of the crash. The drone, a U.S. Navy MQ-8 Fire Scout, was one of two aboard the USS Halyburton frigate and is reported to be used for surveillance and targeting acquisition only. ([Aviation Week](#))