

Libya: Ambiguities Over the Interpretation of UN Resolutions 1973 Causing Global Consternation

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Controversy and contestation abound concerning the manner in which powers such as the United States

,
United Kingdom
and
France

have chosen to implement and enforce the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandated no-fly zone in

Libya

. African actors, including the African Union (AU) and several heads of state have called into question the interpretation of the mandate, arguing that what is happening in Libya involves considerably more than just imposing a no-fly zone and that the powers involved are exceeding the stated intentions and objectives of UNSC resolution 1973.

The resolution stated that civilians would be protected by "any means necessary" a phrase that is seen as sufficiently ambiguous as to allow ulterior motives and interests to creep into the carrying out of the mission in Libya (see ACPP Daily Briefing, 18 March 2011). It has been posited by some that while there is the necessity of humanitarian intervention to prevent Qaddafi's forces from committing mass atrocities against rebels and civilians living in former rebel held areas, the primary motivation for their intervention is to secure

Libya

's oil supply.

Into this mix of unclear objectives and interests is thrown the issue of regime change, a dormant US policy that, while pursued by the previous US administrations, has so far been overtly marginalised in US foreign

policy. The large quantity of tomahawk cruise missile attacks on Libyan targets, and the subsequent attack on a building within Qaddafi's compound in

Tripoli

have led credence to the above speculations and subsequently a number of African, Arabic and Western actors have voiced concerns about their continued support for the UN mission in Libya

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Without doubt, the attacks have clearly hurt Qaddafi and limited his means to make war. A worrying problem, however, is that similar to the Iraq invasion of 2003, there appears to be no clear exit strategy. There has, seemingly, been a rush to be involved in action and claim some

credit to satisfy domestic audiences. For instance,
France

, still reeling from its diplomatic blunders in
North Africa

, seems to have been keen to take the lead and seize the initiative by recognising the rebel's interim governing council. This seems intended to leverage Sarkozy's own support back home given the serious challenges his leadership is facing against the backdrop of the support enjoyed by extremist right-wing parties and candidates. (...)

(...) The African Union has, unfortunately, been marginalised in Libya as the result of its own (in)actions as well as those of countries enforcing the no-fly zone. Some people see in US and European actions a confirmation that Libya and North Africa should be regarded as both different and separate from Sub Saharan Africa and therefore within their sphere of influence. To this line of thought, the

US

and

Europe

see it as obligatory for them to play a decisive role in determining the type and structure of politics and international relations in this region. This, however, raises uncomfortable questions about whether the AU is in fact capable of maintaining peace or effectively preventing atrocities and conflict within its sphere of influence.

Broadly speaking, the impressive speed with which resolution 1973 was proposed and passed is commendable in lieu of the almost indisputable fact that Qaddafi and his forces were poised to commit mass atrocities against his own people. If, however, it were to be shown that the no-fly zone attacks are causing civilian deaths and damage then the credibility of those powers will be seriously undermined. The responsibility of the UN is to ensure the protection of all civilians is without doubt welcome, especially given that Qaddafi had plainly promised to have 'no mercy' for rebels. The challenge, however, is to avoid mission creep as the current intervention is beginning to resemble the prelude to a ground invasion.