

War in Libya – the role of the arms and oil industries

The UK and other NATO countries claim they took military action in Libya for humanitarian reasons. Stuart Parkinson asks whether the situation was really that simple.

Western leaders such as David Cameron have been engaging in a great deal of triumphalism following the fall of the Gaddafi regime after six months of NATO military involvement in the Libyan uprising. Rather less attention has been given to the roles that the UK and other democracies played in supporting the Gaddafi regime over the previous six years – not least through the activities of their arms and oil industries.

Oil for weapons

According to the most recent figures from OPEC,¹ Libya has the eighth largest proven oil reserves in the world, and the largest in Africa – some 46 billion barrels. Oil exports earned the country a massive \$31bn in 2009, with 75% going to European Union countries. Numerous western oil companies had exploration contracts in the country.

Income from oil sales had been the main revenue for the Gaddafi regime for most, if not all, of its 42 years in power, allowing it to make major purchases of weaponry. However, international arms embargoes – imposed because of the regime's links to international terrorism – had restricted procurement until late 2004.² The change in policy followed Libya's announcement that all its programmes related to weapons of mass destruction had been terminated. From this point on, imports of military equipment rapidly increased, including large orders from the UK and other NATO countries. According to data from the European Commission,³ EU countries exported a total of €763m worth of military equipment to Libya from 2005 to 2009 inclusive. This included €278m worth of military aircraft – mainly from France and Italy, two of the countries most involved in the NATO air campaign. Britain, for its part, exported €119m worth of military equipment, including armoured vehicles and tear gas allegedly used in Gaddafi's attempts to suppress the rebellion.⁴

After the uprisings across the Arab world began in early 2011, the British government quickly shifted its position, revoking over 150 military export licenses to Libya, Bahrain and other Middle Eastern countries.⁵ However, as the uprisings were in full swing Cameron still decided to embark on a trade mission, including representatives from UK arms companies, to several Arab nations.⁶

In light of these trade deals, it is clear that industrial interests were to the fore in the late 2000s. Yet during this period, Amnesty International had continued to severely criticise the Gaddafi regime for its human rights record.⁷ While a case can be made for gradually improving economic ties as a way of reducing hostility between nations, the trading patterns of many NATO countries with Libya can only be described as highly irresponsible. As one security analyst pointed out, if the military sales still under negotiation at the start of 2011 had gone ahead earlier, NATO forces would have had much more serious problems in their military campaign.⁸

The role of the oil industry should not be forgotten either. While it had helped the regime generate a huge income, it had not been silent over the potential for generating greater profits for itself. According to official US documents posted on the Wikileaks website, US oil companies had been vociferously complaining to the Obama government about the restrictions Gaddafi had placed on them.⁹

Criticisms of the NATO strategy

While some mainstream commentators accept that past arms sales to Libya have been irresponsible, they still argue a humanitarian justification for using NATO forces to oust Colonel Gaddafi. However, there are serious flaws in this argument.

Firstly, the death toll from the seven months of conflict (so far) is not small. Rigorous assessment is yet to take place, but Libya's National Transitional Council has estimated it to be "at least 30,000".¹⁰ NATO – which gave a key justification for its involvement as the need to protect civilians – has not been counting. Yet it has carried out over 9,000 'strike sorties' (as of the end of September).¹¹

Furthermore, while UN Security Council Resolution 1973 gave permission for "all necessary measures... to protect civilians... excluding a foreign occupation force",¹² it did not give explicit permission for regime change. This led to the rejection of proposals to find a negotiated settlement – including proposals from the African Union – by the anti-Gaddafi forces and NATO countries. Negotiating peace with Gaddafi would not have been easy, but the ensuing war has hardly led to the quick, low casualty victory that was expected.

A further problem with the broad interpretation of UN Resolution 1973 by NATO countries was that it soured relations within the UN Security Council. Attempts to agree subsequent resolutions on, for

example, economic sanctions against the Syrian government for its brutal suppression of an uprising have so far failed.

And there is the wider issue about the prioritisation of resources. The NATO military campaign has cost billions.¹³ But much smaller sums are still required, for example, to help provide food aid to the 12 million people in need as drought and famine spread across East Africa during the course of 2011. The UN has warned that without more help 750,000 could die between September and December.¹⁴

Given this evidence, it is hard not to conclude that economic and industrial interests – rather than humanitarian interests – have had the greatest influence over the policies followed by NATO countries, both in the years before the war in Libya and in the decision to help depose the Gaddafi regime.

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