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. 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. 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.

**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”. 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).

Furthermore, while UN Security Council Resolution 1973 gave permission for “all necessary measures… to protect civilians… excluding a foreign occupation force”, 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. 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.

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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**References**

8. As note 2.