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No Time To Abandon Ship In Libya

The NATO intervention in Libya has ousted the Gaddafi regime but will the allies expect their dues to be paid in oil, asks Joseph Wakim

While the Libyan ground rebels are now out to sniff out a rat, their aerial allies may soon land for another reason: oil.

When NATO's mandate expires at the end of September, will they declare mission accomplished and go back home to Europe, pleased that they have rid the Libyans of their delusional despot? I think not. While NATO's left hand has paid sky-high costs for the military mission, the right hand itches for a fair return on that investment.

The United Nations Security Council was at pains to differentiate the mission in Libya from the ill-fated mission in Iraq.

On 17 March, a more measured Resolution 1973 endorsed Operation Unified Protector in response to the "widespread and systematic attacks ... against the civilian population [that] may amount to crimes against humanity". NATO Member States were "to take all necessary measures ... to protect civilians ... under threat of attack ... while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory".

The resolution also called for an immediate cease fire, a no-fly zone, blocking the "continuing flows of mercenaries", an asset freeze on funds, assets and resources "which are owned or controlled ... by the Libyan authorities", and an enforcement of an arms embargo — except the weapons smuggled via Tunisia from fellow Sunni country Qatar to arm the rebels.

Although NATO insisted that it would "always remain impartial" and "not take sides", the Operation extended its 6500 strikes to non-military targets that may "incite acts of violence" such as satellite dishes, all to hasten regime change.

After all, this operation had cost the eight NATO members an estimated €1 billion at a time of austerity measures in Europe. Access to the oil fields and return on the financial investment was surely urgent.

Why such cynicism about this human rights mission? Because the NATO intervention turns a blind eye to the atrocities committed by other Arab governments, especially in the Gulf States and the Palestinian occupied territories, where those in power are already allies with the world's sole superpower.

To compound the urgency, NATO failed to condemn the bounty on Gaddafi's head. The NTC chairman Mustata Abdel Jallil supported this initiative by businessmen to pay 2 million dinars "for the capture of Gaddafi, dead or alive". Jallil also offered amnesty to "members of [Gaddafi's] close circle who kill him or capture him".

While the iconic image of a beheaded leader may bring rejoicing and relief, this is not what is called for by the UNSC resolution. Instead, it referred the situation to the International Criminal Court, "stressing that those responsible for ... attacks targeting the civilian population ... must be held to account".

The foundations and constitutions of a post-Gaddafi Libya should be sealed not with blood but with the ink of trials, testimonies and truth. Surely, there has been enough collaboration between NATO and the NTC to caution against a bloodthirsty finale. Surely, NATO would know that disarming all the trigger-happy rebels may be tough if they become too wedded to their identity in this bloody and ironic revolution against a former revolutionary.

Indeed, it is peculiar that these pro-democracy protestors were labelled rebels since the popular uprising began in Benghazi on 17 February. In no other Arab "spring" has the movement earned this temporary tag, as their rebellion is virtually victorious. While horrific reports are emerging about mass graves for Gaddafi's prisoners, there are also reports of rebels attacking the homes of civilians and of the mass killing of Gaddafi supporters.

So now the NATO eyes in the sky who navigated and facilitated the regime change plan to land and reap the benefits of their alliance.

Already, Italy has been reassured that prior contracts for oil extraction will be honoured. Germany expects a return on its €100 million in aid. Britain expects recognition for unfreezing Libyan assets that had been blocked by UN sanctions. France is queuing up for its fair share while inviting talks with "friends of Libya" in Paris on 1 September.

But the country who needs the oil revenue most is Libya itself, as oil constituted 95 per cent of its exports when it was producing 1.6 million barrels per day. The new caretakers of this nation need safeguards against the temptation and traps that Iraq fell into when the smell of money attracted new rats that bred on corruption and division.

These safeguards are covered by Resolution 1973 which calls for a panel of "eight experts" to address implementation, non-compliance, benefits, contracts and transactions that emanate from the related resolutions.

NATO, TNC and their cheer squads need to heed the UNSC resolution honourably, not selectively. Let us not repeat the mistakes of history where yesterday's rebels become today's allies, then tomorrow's rogue rats to be trapped.

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