

UPDATED: Africa in the 2011 Libyan conflict: the inside story

“[Intervention] is a high and summary procedure which may sometimes snatch a remedy beyond the reach of law. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in the case of Intervention, as in that of Revolution, its essence is illegality and its justification is its success.”

– Sir William Harcourt, 1862.
From: *African roles in the Libyan conflict of 2011.*



Photo: Henry Patton

JSRP Research Director Alex de Waal’s [new article in International Affairs](#) provides an insider’s revealing take on the previously unreported role that African governments and the African Union (AU) played in the Libyan Conflict of 2011.

African roles in the Libyan conflict of 2011 draws on extensive interviews with the AU officials involved in the crisis, offering behind-the-scenes revelations of conflict, deception and dubious alliances in AU members’ negotiations with Gaddafi and the U.S.-led coalition.

Divisions within the African Union

Contrary to media depictions of a uniform and “cosy relationship between [Gaddafi] and African leaders”, de Waal describes African governments as divided in their response to the crisis:

While most of the continent wanted Gaddafi gone with minimal disruption, a few leaders were sympathetic to the ‘Brother Leader’. Chad and Niger, fearful of spillover, leaned towards Gaddafi. Algeria took a strict non-interventionist position. Some other African leaders were so antipathetic to Gaddafi that they would have no truck with compromise.



AU Ad-hoc High Level Committee meeting on Libya in June 2011. Photo: Government of South Africa.

Despite their divisions,

... the African Union (AU) was able to agree on a political strategy aimed at achieving a negotiated settlement and power transition [...] contrary to widespread perception that the AU sought to prop up Gaddafi, it offered a credible and balanced option of a negotiated solution.

The AU’s proposal, de Waal argues, was never considered seriously by the coalition led by France, Britain and the United States. While the African Union’s provisions were included and acknowledged in UN Security Council [Resolution](#)

1973, they were selectively omitted upon the Resolution's implementation by the coalition, who favoured military action over the AU provisions for negotiation and humanitarian aid:

... the intervention stretched the bounds of legality, misleading the African states that voted in favour of Resolution 1973 into believing that their concerns to bring about a ceasefire, humanitarian access and a negotiated settlement would be taken seriously.

Sudan: champion of the Responsibility to Protect?

De Waal calls the surprising role that Sudan's government played in Libya the "untold story [of the] Libyan conflict":

While the AU was pursuing a negotiated settlement, one member state—Sudan—was actively involved in providing military support to the Libyan opposition, in discreet coordination with Qatar and NATO.

In public remarks praising the coalition, however, Barack Obama declined to acknowledge Sudan's contribution. The reason?

The most outspoken proponents of US military action against Gaddafi were members of the administration who had also entertained or advocated similar action against the Sudanese government, invoking the principle of the 'responsibility to protect'.


In other words, pending accusations of genocide and war crimes against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir made him an awkward standard-bearer for human rights in the region.

This alliance of convenience between the humanitarian hawks in Washington DC and Sudan's intelligence chiefs has no small measure of irony attached to it, especially for those who applaud the Libyan intervention as an exemplar of the responsibility to protect. The Libyan campaign may indeed become an exemplar of the practice of R2P, but one that illustrates the limits of the doctrine, not its unalloyed success.



South African President Jacob Zuma and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir at the Ordinary Summit of the African Union, January 2011. Photo: Gov of South Africa.

De Waal concludes:

The outcome of the Libyan conflict has left Africa damaged. The AU was not able to convince Libyans, Africans or the world that it was a credible interlocutor for peace in Libya. Africa did not present a united position, and did not provide the financial, military or diplomatic resources necessary for the AU initiative to appear 

a genuine alternative, let alone to prevail. This is particularly regrettable because the AU's diagnosis of the Libyan conflict was fundamentally correct. This conflict was both a popular uprising against a dictatorship and a civil war within a patronage-based political order, with regional repercussions.

The full article is available for download [here](#) at no charge.

UPDATE: Alex de Waal [answers readers' questions about this article at the Reinventing Peace blog](#).

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