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Arab League prepares to back no-fly zone

By Roula Khalaf in London and Joshua Chaffin in Brussels

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The Arab League is preparing to accept a UN-backed no-fly zone over Libya when foreign ministers meet in Cairo on Saturday, a move that would provide much-needed Arab cover to international intervention.

Hisham Youssef, a senior Arab League official, told the Financial Times that Libyan leader Muammer Gaddafi's actions had crossed lines, making it difficult for foreign ministers not to back a no-fly zone that would protect civilians against regime attacks.

“States would want a UN Security Council resolution that addresses the no-fly zone so it would not be unilateral action,” he said. “The league is moving towards accepting this.”

The Cairo meeting follows an unusually strong statement on Thursday by Arab Gulf states which said the Gaddafi government was no longer legitimate. The Gulf Cooperation Council statement also called on the UN to protect Libyan civilians, including a no-fly zone.

Acquiescence by the Arab League has become one of the prerequisites of western allies for a no-fly zone or other military intervention. Nato and the European Union said they would not act unless the League and the UN both signed off on a military response.

US president Barack Obama said on Friday the world had to increase pressure on Libya as he voiced concern that Col Gaddafi could defeat the country's rebels. At a White House press conference, he said Nato was in contact with Arab and African countries to "gauge their support" for a no-fly zone. But US military and political officials have reservations that a no-fly zone could prove ineffective while drawing Washington into the conflict.

At a summit of European leaders in Brussels on Friday, heads of government rebuffed a French and British demand for specific backing of a no-fly zone. The leaders said they would "examine all necessary options" to protect civilian populations as long as they received UN approval and "support from the region". Nato defence ministers adopted almost identical language on Thursday.

Mr Youssef said Arab support for a no-fly zone would make it difficult for Russia and China to oppose the move in the UN Security Council, where the two states have veto power.

Nicolas Sarkozy, French president, had been pushing the EU for the option of using "defensive" air-strikes against Gaddafi forces in the event that they resorted to chemical weapons attacks or used air power on defenceless protesters.

"The British and ourselves are wondering what happens if civilians, who are demonstrating peacefully and non-violently, are targeted by Mr Gaddafi," Mr Sarkozy said after the summit. "Should we simply stand by or should we act?"

David Cameron, British prime minister, had joined the French call for a no-fly zone, but British officials later had to distance themselves from Mr Sarkozy's rhetoric on air strikes.

Still, Mr Sarkozy was able to get agreement from fellow EU leaders that Col Gaddafi was "no longer an interlocutor" for Europe and that the National Council would become its "political interlocutor" in Libya.

The French president had earlier recognised the opposition Libyan National Council – and Tripoli later announced suspension of its diplomatic relations with Paris.

European leaders also called for a summit of the EU, the Arab League and the African Union to co-ordinate a response.

The US and Germany resist military action, arguing it could draw western powers into a civil war on the side of groups the west knows little about.