



Oral evidence: [Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options](#),

HC 520

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Members present:

Foreign Affairs Committee: Mr John Baron (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Mr Mark Hendrick; Adam Holloway; Daniel Kawczynski; Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

In the absence of the Chair, Mr Baron was called to the Chair.

Questions 87-147

Witness: **Sir Dominic Asquith KCMG**, former UK Ambassador to Libya and Chairman of the Libyan British Business Council, gave evidence.

Q87 Chair: Sir Dominic, welcome to the Foreign Affairs Committee's second oral evidence session for our inquiry on "Libya: examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options". Hopefully you have seen our terms of reference. As the UK ambassador in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 civil war, you were in pole position to see the attempts at reconstruction. In your present role as chair of the Libyan British Business Council, you are also in a good position to give us your current view on the state of affairs and the ongoing attempt to form a Government of National Accord. We are very much looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

Before I start, I should mention that it looks as though there will be votes this afternoon, so we will be interrupted. We will keep those gaps to a minimum, but I am conscious that you need to be away by 4.30 pm for an appointment later on.

Sir Dominic Asquith: That appointment has now gone, so I am in your hands for as long as you wish.

Chair: Perhaps you shouldn't have told us that.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I am all for transparency.

Q88 Chair: Thank you. That gives us a little flexibility.

I asked whether you would like to make a statement to kick off and you said, “No. Let’s get on with the questions,” so may I kick off with the first question? It is fair to say that things have generally not gone to plan when it comes to our Libyan intervention. We have seen a vicious civil war and much suffering for the peoples themselves. Jihadists and other terrorists are taking advantage of the situation, and we have even seen the democratically elected—perhaps only on an 18% turnout—Government taking refuge on a Greek car ferry off Tobruk. Not best result by any stretch of the imagination.

Previous witnesses have given testimony that there was a lack of planning and understanding as to the forces on the ground. It may not surprise you that there are members of the Committee who are very supportive of the FCO and believe that cuts to it are misguided, but there is a general perception that the FCO was perhaps not as well sighted as it should have been and that there was a lack of expertise and understanding as to how the consequent events would unfold. Can I take your view on that, please? Do you think that there was a lack of planning or understanding of events on the ground? To what extent was the failure of detailed planning driven by a lack of knowledge?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Those are big questions, and I don’t know how long you will let me talk for, but let’s try to see how I can answer them.

In the context of a lack of knowledge, bearing in mind the immediate past history—the 40 years of Gaddafi—I would imagine that it was very difficult to understand the country given the oppression, suppression, monitoring of movements and difficulty of getting in touch with people. So the database of knowledge in terms of people, actors and the tribal structure—the modern database, not the inherited historical knowledge—might well have been less than ideal.

That said—I have had this in Iraq and throughout my time in the Foreign Office—there is an understandable assumption that knowledge will translate naturally into perfect assessments and planning. It doesn’t and we have to accept that. In the last week, both internationally and domestically, we have had many examples of assessments and predictions of how people will vote thrown to the winds. It is an imperfect science, particularly in a context where there are going to be new actors, as there were in Libya, both from outside and inside—people who were not part of the ruling structure and were probably difficult to access for my predecessors. Yes, I agree that there was a lack of as full a knowledge of the ground, in all its aspects, than was ideal. Would we have done better if we had had better knowledge? I don’t know. That is a counterfactual that I am not sure about.

The second part of your question is to do with planning. I should preface what I am going to say with an important caveat, which is that I got properly engaged in Libya in November 2011. I was handling a different revolution up until then in a neighbouring country. I therefore had awareness of the planning for Libya only from talking to people before I was deployed. My very strong impression is that there was extensive planning by the stabilisation unit here in Whitehall and by the UN, although it clearly had to be scrupulous in its neutrality at that point, given the contested Government. Indeed, even in the capital that I was operating in, Cairo, there was a large UN conference in the second half of June 2011 which went through the seven or so thematic sectors that would be the focus of attention in a Libya the day after Gaddafi. So there was planning.

I think it is fair to say that one of the lessons of Iraq was that we should not get into what we used to call in Iraq phase 4—the point after military victory—without a proper understanding of what the challenges would be and some attempt to put into place plans for dealing with those challenges. I would be happy at a later stage to explain what the fairly long agenda of things to do was when I came into the job.

Q89 Chair: We will come to that. Can I take you back to your point about planning? You say that there was planning, yet clearly—certainly the previous witnesses would testify to this—there was a lack of understanding of what was happening on the ground, particularly events subsequent to the actual use of force. How do you account for that mismatch? If there was planning but a lack of understanding, that surely suggests that perhaps there isn't the depth of expertise and knowledge at the FCO that was required for such an operation.

Sir Dominic Asquith: There was a debate in academic and official circles about the interaction of the following elements: the lack of capacity that would exist in the administration of the country thanks to the 40 years of Gaddafi; the interrelationship between regions and tribes and, to a lesser extent, the religious, Islamist trend; ethnicity in the form of the Tebu and Tuareg; and some of the historical legacy of federalism.

There was an understanding of the challenges; there was not, and in my view there could not be until you got engaged on the ground, a proper understanding of the effects of those challenges in terms of implementing any plans or projects one had in mind or of how to deal with the very real problems that then emerged—for example, the split of authority between the National Transitional Council and what became the Transitional Government, where you had this constitutionally very awkward relationship where the NTC asserted in the constitutional declaration its primacy as the supreme authority in the country, yet you had an Executive that was trying to do what an Executive does: implement policies.

Q90 Chair: Can I ask some logistical questions? How many UK staff did you as the ambassador have at the embassy?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I should know that off the top of my head, but it would be in the region of 30 or 40. It is difficult to gauge, because some were—perhaps the best way of describing it is that there was a variety of staff. There were officials from various Government Departments: the Foreign Office, DFID, the Ministry of Defence and UKTI. Then there was a variety of contracted staff operating under and funded out of those Government Departments; and there was also a fairly hefty private security company for protection—so it could get very large at various points.

Q91 Chair: The UK has had five ambassadors to Libya since 2010; would you consider that excessive?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Ideally, yes, and I would have stayed on longer than I did, but, for reasons with which I will not bother the Committee, I left earlier than either I or the Foreign Office had wanted or expected. I think that is true, and it is a lesson that we should have drawn and did draw from Iraq—I think I was the last one-year ambassador in Iraq; they opted for two years thereafter, and I was delighted that my successor stayed on longer than I did—two and a half years, I think. If the person is prepared to operate at the level at which he would need to operate—it is a highly charged, seven-days-a-week job—then ideally yes.

Q92 Chair: A final question from me in this section: I take it from what you have said, Sir Dominic, that you are not denying that had there been greater investment in the FCO, we might have been better sighted with regard to the consequences of our actions. Would you disagree with that?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would not disagree with that, but I would not want an impression created that that was the major reason for Libya not turning out more successfully than it did.

Q93 Ann Clwyd: I think the last time we met was in Iraq. I wonder whether you can draw any comparisons between planning in Iraq and planning in Libya, particularly as DFID was presumably involved in Libya; it certainly was involved in Iraq. Were there any difficulties with two Government Departments being represented there? Were each of you clear what your responsibilities were, or did you overlap to such an extent that it was impossible to make that distinction?

Sir Dominic Asquith: The major difference between Libya and Iraq was that Libya was handed to the UN to manage, whereas Iraq was clearly an American domain, which we supported. That decision to give primacy to the UN to co-ordinate international assistance brought with it, in my view, some difficulties in terms of, as it were, the state of the Libyan Administration and its capacity to set its own priorities and determine what assistance it needed. I think it was in need of a more prescriptive agenda, set by the international community, which, in the nature of things, the UN tends not to do. That was the prime difference between the two.

In terms of co-ordination between the various Government Departments, it was not just DFID and the Foreign Office. It was also Business, the UKTI and the Ministry of Defence, and contractors operating on the security agenda, albeit jointly funded by the Foreign Office, the MOD and DFID.

In my view, there was not—in my time, anyway; I cannot say what happened afterwards—a competition on the ground. There were, of course, demarcation lines back here in London, but on the ground, my job was very much to sew the various elements together, so that the operation was cohesive, in that what we were doing in one area, such as advice on police, would not either conflict with what others in the UK were doing or cut across what we may be doing in transitional justice or whatever you might call looking after the human rights of the detainees. That is the way the embassy was run under me: to make sure that that collaboration was clear, the requirement for it was clear and the knowledge of what others were doing was transparent. To answer your question, I did not feel, on the ground, any difficulty in drawing on the expertise of those various staff or in blending them together.

Q94 Yasmin Qureshi: When you started your appointment as the ambassador in 2011, were you optimistic about Libya's future at that point?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Yes. It was a small population; it had a lot of money; there was not any sectarianism; the animosities between the various factions were nothing like as deep as in Iraq; and the focus on doing something—avoiding a sort of paralysis—was stronger than it was in Egypt after the revolution, so there were clear reasons to be optimistic. There

was a sense of business wanting to do something. There was, in large part thanks to the UK, a growing, active and vociferous civil society, which was an inspiration for a lot of people and a cause of optimism.

I remember remarking in one of my letters home that after 35 years or whatever it was of being in the Middle East, I thought I may have come across an Arab country that understood how to reconcile and forgive. That was certainly so in November and December; there was a strong tide, which, I think it is fair to say, went up to the first anniversary of the revolution, when there was a mood of wanting to move forward, albeit there were plenty of challenges ahead. That was the optimistic side, but at the same time, we weren't naive or simple. We knew what the challenges were coming from an extremely confused context, and what Gaddafi's legacy was in terms of the administrative capacity and distrust that existed.

Q95 Yasmin Qureshi: Can you give us a concrete example of what you were saying about the concerns and challenges? Are we talking about the security challenges or internal fighting among different groups? Can you give us an example of the challenges?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would divide them up—there is quite a long list, and I was thinking them through—into two different categories: the institutional challenges and the practical challenges. In the case of the institutional challenges, there was, as I mentioned earlier, a question of authority: did authority for taking decisions lie with the NTC or with the Executive? That was always bedevilling us, the international community, in trying to make progress.

Unquestionably, there was a question of factionalism and power vacuums in the areas that were liberated. Obviously, until October, Gaddafi was still around, and there was the concern that came from that. There was the pressure to appoint quickly a unity Government to take over what was then called the executive committee of the NTC, and to put in place what would be quite a problematical balance of interests. Capacity for administration inside the Government was a major concern. There is an inevitable balance and awkwardness between expatriate and indigenous populations. You need the expertise of those from outside, but they come with baggage. There are many more.

Q96 Yasmin Qureshi: If I understand what you are saying correctly, there seem to be issues of good governance, stability and trying to reconcile different factions and groups.

Sir Dominic Asquith: There was a major question of how you build national consensus.

Q97 Yasmin Qureshi: You said that you also had causes for optimism, such the lack of sectarianism or religious fanaticism. I don't know whether you followed our Committee's previous hearing, when experts in this area were asked specifically about: when we started the intervention in Libya, we were told that it was because of the thought of innocent people in Benghazi being killed imminently. The experts were unanimous in saying that that was not the case.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I was surprised to read that. I read it with close attention. I would say a few things about what your previous witnesses said. I differ from them. First, I would say that it was a very bold person who would decide to disbelieve Gaddafi. Balanced

judgment was not his hallmark. Moreover, what had just happened on either side of him in Egypt and in Tunis must have loomed large in his mind about what the consequences would be if you let internal dissent get out of hand. So I think for those two reasons alone I would be sceptical of the judgment that he was just playing with rhetoric. *[Interruption.]* Do I lose you all?

Chair: Only in a physical sense. We have to participate in a vote, Sir Dominic. We will continue with that question. If there are two votes, I suggest we get back for half past.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: Sir Dominic, you were finishing your answer.

Sir Dominic Asquith: The third point on the Benghazi issue is this. I have been checking my recollection with a Libyan today as I thought this might come up. He reminded me that 60% of the population of Benghazi had left because they were afraid of the threat. I certainly remember going through the subject when I was ambassador with the then American ambassador, before Chris Stevens, Gene Cretz. He had been ambassador before the revolution as well, so did the bridge. He was in no doubt that it was a threat that one needed to take seriously. That is my take on whether there was a real threat to Benghazi or not.

Q98 Yasmin Qureshi: When we heard from different groups of experts on previous occasions, we asked that specific question. One striking thing they said was that Gaddafi's modus operandi in Libya was to go after those who were involved in the armed conflict with people—he even sent out his sons sometimes to different areas—but he did not actually target civilians. That is, those who were not involved in the conflict. That is the stark thing they said. It made me think. When we had the debate in Parliament about Libya, I certainly had my reservations.

Sir Dominic Asquith: Sitting in Cairo, admittedly at a bit of a distance, there was no doubt in the minds of everybody around me—Egyptians, whoever—that there was a serious threat, and that included the Arab League.

Q99 Daniel Kawczynski: You used the term “national consensus” in your previous answer. What part, if any, could Crown Prince Mohammed play as a constitutional monarch in bringing national consensus to Libya?

Sir Dominic Asquith: As you know, there will be different views from different Libyans about that. I am hesitant to ascribe a role to any outsider, any Libyan, but let me hazard this. If the current political negotiations are not rescued and do not lead to a political agreement that can be implemented, and the country deteriorates further into violence, it is reasonable to assume that those arguing for a federal split, a split of the country, or for a strong military leader will be strengthened in their views.

That was very much the sense in Benghazi on Friday, even before, but particularly after, the missiles and rockets hit that demonstration, when the frustration for the political process, such as it is, increased quite a few notches. In that context, I would assume there would be many who would say, “Hold on a minute before we go down the federalist or the

military leader track. Let us look at another way of trying to do two things. One is find a person who can sit above the political leadership and give direction and one who can, by sitting above the political factionalism, try to unite the country.” I do not think it is inconceivable that he could play that role, but it would be a huge ask.

Q100 Stephen Gethins: From your time as ambassador between 2011 and 2012, could you tell us briefly about the role of the United Nations? Can you give us an overview of your assessment of the effectiveness of the United Nations in co-ordinating international support for the reconstruction efforts?

Sir Dominic Asquith: In some areas, it was strong. It was particularly strong on the elections. Leaving aside the subject you may want to get into, which is whether we went into elections too early, it did a very good job at organising them. However, it came in with the point of view that international assistance needed to respond to a Libyan lead, and given the state of the Libyan capacity to administer after Gaddafi, to be honest, Libyan-led did not necessarily mean well-led. It was a subject of regular discussion between me and the leader of UNSMIL, in terms of what would be the best UN approach to help the transitional Government do what it needed to do, which was to do things.

In my view, it would have been more helpful if the UN had been more prescriptive in identifying the priorities for a Libyan Government or helping that Government to identify those priorities, and then accessing and leveraging out of the international community the sort of assistance that would have helped a Libyan Government to do the things it needed to do, rather than the posture that I think UNSMIL were happier with, which was, “We will absorb, wait and listen to what the Libyan Government says it needs and then react.” The phrase I heard over and over again in the first month or two of that transitional Government was, “We need help in knowing what help we need.” That was a private comment. There was a public positioning that was slightly more nationalistic, but at heart, I think that was what they were looking for. We, the international community, with the UN leading it, needed to be responsive to it.

Q101 Stephen Gethins: I sense some gentle criticism—they were very difficult circumstances—of the United Nations. What support did the United Kingdom provide to the UN reconstruction project? More specifically, when you talk about hearing, “We need help in knowing what help we need,” did the United Kingdom Government carry out any assessments of that, either in conjunction with the United Nations or by ourselves?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I think we were the largest donor to the UN, so we had that role. In terms of working in tandem with the UN, we worked very closely with them on the police side, with the Interior Minister. There was a UN-appointed police adviser, who I think found it rather a challenge. We had an extremely good police adviser, whom I made available to the Interior Minister to help the UN develop the programme they were trying to develop of creating the structure into which we hoped, at that point, the militias would be demilitarised and absorbed. There was a specific offer.

In terms of helping the UN in other aspects, there was the question of the flow of money, the managing of the budget and so on. We had a fairly simple public financial management programme that was, in essence, a sort of accountancy programme that allowed the Ministry of Finance to determine what it was spending on what. That then got elaborated

into something much too complex by the World Bank, but, again, it was the sort of platform from which the next bit of the UN programme was going to operate.

If you recall those days, there was a real difficulty in the flow of revenue and getting revenue into Libya, so we worked in support of UN efforts to unfreeze some of the 12 billion that was here belonging to the central bank. Indeed, when I came in for a short time at the end of August, I came in on a C-17 with 280 million dinar in notes from De La Rue. There was help with some of the money flows in the initial period so that the Government would have money to construct a budget around.

There was certainly heavy support in my interventions on the justice programme. There was deep concern about the treatment particularly of third country nationals, but also of people who had been arrested by various militias who were kept in detention out of the judicial system. So it was about helping the Ministry of Justice assert its control and authority in those areas. On civil society, we worked closely with the UN and the EU, which had a lead in that area. Those are examples.

We would have regular co-ordinating meetings, chaired by the UN, of the key dozen or so countries that were engaged to make sure that what we were doing—this was very much a shared desire from myself, the Americans, the French and the UN itself—and what those key donors who were participating on the ground were doing was complementary to what the UN was doing.

Going back to the first question about the effect of the UN, I should add that there was in the initial structure in Paris in the summer, where the UN and the EU were both given responsibility for helping with the reconstruction of Libya, inevitably a bit of a tussle over who had the lead in which areas. But those were wrinkles rather than serious problems.

Q102 Stephen Gethins: Sure. You mentioned the UK being one of the largest donors and that you were obviously undertaking an accountancy programme and a justice programme. I think there were issues around rule of law and security, so you had quite a significant series of programmes, actually quite important programmes. Can you tell me why figures released from the House of Commons Library show that we spent 13 times more bombing Libya than we did on reconstruction efforts? We have spent about £320 million on our military efforts and £25 million on reconstruction efforts since 2011. Did we get it right? Why are we now in the state of affairs that means the numbers are skewed in that way?

Sir Dominic Asquith: The calculation was that it had oil revenues which would be coming in. It had in the form of the central bank large foreign exchange assets, and as I say, back in December I think it was, there was an early case for getting a Security Council resolution to unfreeze those particular assets. The Libyan Investment Authority assets are a different case apart and most of those are still frozen. The central bank was an early target of freeing up assets.

My understanding was that Libya, with a small population of roughly 6 million, would have considerable assets at its disposal and the provision of money or funding was not the highest priority. Expertise of various kinds was. I should have added that the list of projects that we worked closely on with the UN was an extraordinary, concerted effort on

unexploded ordnance which was, to pick up your point about the NATO bombing, a direct result of some of those bombings.

Q103 Stephen Gethins: So part of that £25 million would have been unexploded ordnance.

If I may, I have one final question, Chair. So basically, the lack of spending was largely because we thought that the Libyans had money enough themselves to deal with the problems or the aftermath of the conflict.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I may be wrong, but I think so, yes.

Q104 Mike Gapes: The time when you were ambassador coincided with a period that one of our witnesses told us was a window of opportunity in which it might have been possible to consolidate security and build institutions. Do you agree that that period was the window?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I do, but it is important to understand why the window closed, or why the window was not exploited properly. There is a variety of reasons. In retrospect, it might well have made sense to have a stabilisation force from outside there, but there certainly was no appetite for it.

The problem for us collectively was: who had the ability—the power—to face down the militias in Libya? Unquestionably there was a Libyan responsibility here for not making use of this opportunity. Their leaders were warned, I know, time and again about the dangers of relying on militias to provide security, effectively giving them permission to operate. That was why the number of revolutionaries mushroomed in the next year from the 20,000 to 25,000 who fought in the revolution to 140,000, I think, as groups who did not take part in the fighting were effectively established to keep order around the country.

Q105 Mike Gapes: Are you saying that, with the changes that happened, because there was no authority, there was no institutional structure that could confront the militias?

Sir Dominic Asquith: There was not a central one—the armed forces and the police had been disbanded. There is a question mark over the acceptability for the Libyan society at that time of the reintroduction of old police on to the streets. So there was not a standing force, whether police or military, to hold the ring.

Q106 Mike Gapes: You were in Iraq. We were supposed to have learnt the lessons of Iraq, but one of those lessons was that the de-Ba'athification process led to the situation afterwards. Was there no planning and foresight to think about what would happen once Gaddafi had gone?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I wasn't there for that bit, so you would have to ask somebody else. When I arrived, which was November, it was well after that—the militias were in control.

Let me go back a bit and try to answer it in a different way. If we had focused on Benghazi initially and then Tripoli rather than trying to stand up a force to cover the whole of the country, in terms of persuading the Libyan leadership to establish security forces that operated under central command in those two main cities, I think it might have been a different state of affairs. That is one opportunity that we missed.

It is different from Iraq in the sense that in Iraq you had to cover the whole of the country. I think we could have focused our effort on two areas.

Q107 Mike Gapes: Our witnesses in the session a couple of weeks ago almost implied that Libya was ungovernable without Gaddafi and that getting rid of him meant that this was inevitable. Is that your view?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Libya outside Tripoli is governable, in my view, in a collaboration with the tribes. So it is governable without Gaddafi. But it required a political leadership in Libya that communicated with the whole of the country, which it did not; on the whole it was constrained in Benghazi and Tripoli.

I remember going to see the transitional Prime Minister fairly early on in his time and I had travelled around Libya—

Q108 Mike Gapes: Which transitional Prime Minister was that?

Sir Dominic Asquith: It was the Prime Minister of the transitional Government, El-Keib. I had travelled around more of Libya than he had. That was the nature of the political leadership of the time, but there was, even in those early stages of the transitional Government, before the Executive Council—the first Unity Government was in November 2011—clearly very difficult for the political leadership to see off the pressures being exerted on them by various factions to allow the establishment of militias to oversee security in various parts of the country.

Q109 Nadhim Zahawi: Dominic, I just want to take you back to the lessons learned from both Iraq and Libya. Of course, they are very different in terms of commitment and the coalition. Where there is a similarity, I think you will agree, is that both in Iraq and Libya, whether it is the political elites or the street, they saw the removal of a dictator as very much being orchestrated by a coalition from outside of Libya or outside of Iraq. The complaints, post the removal of Saddam and to some extent post Gaddafi's removal, from some of the elites and in the opinion of the general public is that the coalition was never prescriptive enough in administering Iraq or Libya. What lessons have been learned? Is there a third way? Rather than us being hands-off, once we have gone into these countries and removed a dictator, should we behave differently to at least deliver security for the populace? They can then begin the process of institution-building.

Sir Dominic Asquith: It is not a template that works in all circumstances, so maybe I can answer it in the case of Libya—again, with the benefit of hindsight.

No, let's forget about the benefit of hindsight. If you are going to work as internationals with a Government of Libya, which does not have the security wherewithal to protect itself from attack—that is fundamental to what we are talking about—in my view you have to be honest that the international community has to find a way to provide it with that defence or come to its defence if it is attacked. If you are not prepared as an international community to commit forces on the ground to do that, or there is not the appetite in the UN to have a blue helmet force to do that, you have a problem. There are a variety of ways of trying

to do that, but you ultimately are having to deal with this question of how you persuade people.

If you are not prepared to commit the force on the ground, how do you persuade people to put in place a demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programme against the will of some of them? And if you do not have the ability to exert direct pressure, it is quite difficult to see how you achieve the end that you are looking for. That is the position we were in in Libya. There was no willingness on the part of the external Governments helping Libya, in any of their constituencies, to commit troops on the ground.

Q110 Nadhim Zahawi: So if we take that thought a little further, would you say that unless you are able to answer that very important question, you should not attempt an operation such as the one we attempted in Libya?

Sir Dominic Asquith: It goes back to the Benghazi question. If there was a serious concern about the humanitarian threat, it was reasonable to intervene to prevent that.

Q111 Nadhim Zahawi: Even though you can't answer the elephant in the room question—i.e. would you be able to protect that country in the aftermath from any attack?

Sir Dominic Asquith: In my personal view, yes, but political leaders will take different views. That is an entirely personal view.

Q112 Nadhim Zahawi: One very last question. Can you shed some light and colour on what the Arab countries, including Qatar, were doing as part of the planning and the operations process, and where they are today in their thinking?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I was dealing mainly, at that stage, with the Arab League. The principal objective of that activity was to get Arab League support for a no-fly zone, which was provided. There was no love lost between the Arab League and Gaddafi, so it was an achievable objective to get Arab League support for a no-fly zone. By the time I arrived—my first time through Libya was in late August and early September, and I came back again in November—there was a Qatari presence on the ground in the form of their chief of staff, who was clearly involved in the politics.

Q113 Nadhim Zahawi: Was he doing more of the administration than we were?

Sir Dominic Asquith: No, but he was an actor. In terms of the other presences that I saw, I didn't see many others, to be honest. Thereafter, the line-up was quite clear, in terms of the presence in the Emirates of some of the Libyan political leaders and the support and presence in Qatar of other political leaders, who happened to come from diametrically different points of view about what role religion played. It was quite clear who was lined up in support of whom, and that line-up has persisted. In the case of others, there were still a large number of Egyptians in Libya, and Egypt was very keen that there should be no actions by Egypt that would jeopardise their safety. It was, to some extent, constrained in its actions.

Q114 Mr Hendrick: UN resolution 1973 did not address regime change or the reconstruction of Libya. With the benefit of hindsight, was that a mistake? Do you believe that the international community was effectively hamstrung by the narrow terms of UN resolution 1973?

Sir Dominic Asquith: It wasn't constrained, in terms of assistance to the reconstruction, which was the focus.

Q115 Mr Hendrick: Before you go any further, I remember the vote in this House on that. It was very much about providing protection for civilians and things of that nature. I remember that '73 was quite anodyne. It didn't really go into what might happen afterwards. Are you saying that it shouldn't have done, or that it didn't need to?

Sir Dominic Asquith: At that stage—March 2011—1973 was, as you say, right-to-protect action in support of that and the no-fly zone to help that. That was the focus of effort, certainly as far as I was concerned—I was sitting in Cairo. The focus of effort with the Arab League was to get acquiescence from the Arab side for us to be able to do that right-to-protect action. There were—I don't think I'm giving away any secrets—long conversations between me and the Secretary-General of the Arab League at the time about his interpretation of what he was prepared for us to do under the terms of 1973 or enforcing the no-fly zone. There was no appetite for foreign troops on the ground. So one answer would be that there was no scope for broadening it, if the implication of your question is, "Could it have been broadened to permit foreign troops to go on the ground?" My recollection is that that would not have been sellable in the region, and it was key at that point to have Arab support for what we were doing.

Q116 Mr Hendrick: Was it just a, not knee-jerk, but fairly quick response to what was seen as the attack on Benghazi?

Sir Dominic Asquith: My recollection was that it was a response precisely to protect the inhabitants of Benghazi from being attacked by Gaddafi, which was taken to be a real threat.

Q117 Mr Hendrick: If there were no detailed plans for reconstruction and, obviously, boots on the ground, you did say earlier that you felt that there was exceptional UN planning. One of the lessons from Iraq, which you referred to as phase 4, was to look at the challenges. There was a debate about a lack of capacity. You mentioned the difficulties in terms of different tribes and aspects of religion and indeed ethnicity. Now, it is one thing to say, as you did, that you can understand those challenges, but it is another thing having the wherewithal to be able to deal with those challenges and to bring Libya to a peaceful conclusion afterwards. Are you saying, in effect, that even though the west understood those challenges, we did not understand how to deal with the challenges and to solve the problems?

Sir Dominic Asquith: The planning in the UN, as I understand it, took place some time after 1973 was passed, so it was May, June, July when the NTC was established. We and others were working with the NTC about how to stand it up, as it were, how to make it operate as a potential Government-in-waiting. So the UN planning, I assume in a context in which, as I said, it had to be scrupulous about neutrality, took place at some point after that resolution. When the resolution was passed, I do not think that there was planning—

Q118 Mr Hendrick: What sort of planning are we talking about? Are we talking about the transition to some sort of interim Government, or about post-conflict planning and how to deal with the many real problems that are likely to be on the ground—as you mentioned,

dealing with the militias, the police force, food or relief? What sort of planning are we talking about?

Sir Dominic Asquith: There was an international, including British, presence in Benghazi from April 2011 working with the NTC. You will recall that there was a series of meetings with the NTC thereafter on an almost monthly basis in various places around the region and in Europe. In May 2011, a stabilisation plan was put to the NTC with proposals and suggestions about what would be required in a post-Gaddafi context.

Q119 Mr Hendrick: That does not sound to me like a plan that was put together by the UN before the conflict; that sounds to me like a plan that is emerging and a process that is emerging after the conflict has already subsided. You should have had all the plans and things in place. It sounds to me like a process. It does not sound to me like the nuts and bolts of actually getting things done on the ground so that the conflict would not escalate in the way that it did.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I am not aware of any planning before—do you mean the conflict in March?

Q120 Mr Hendrick: You said that there was exceptional UN planning prior to the conflict.

Sir Dominic Asquith: If I said that, I spoke wrongly. I do not think I used the word “exceptional”, but there was UN planning. I was aware of UN planning in the summer of 2011, after March. I am not aware of any UN planning before Gaddafi’s threat against Benghazi, nor would it have made sense for there to have been any.

Q121 Mr Hendrick: Not before his threat against Benghazi, but before NATO took action.

Sir Dominic Asquith: There was no UN planning that I am aware of before NATO took action, whenever it was—17 March. If I misled you, I apologise.

Q122 Mr Hendrick: One of the witnesses in a previous session we had on this subject said that the transition to democracy in 2012 was ridiculously rushed. How effective do you believe that the NTC interim Government were at building the institutional capacity of the Libyan state to support any future democratic Government?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I do not think the NTC was effective, no. It inherited, as all of us heard many times in a single day, over and over again, a system that was incapable of operating, given the way that Gaddafi had approached governance and administration, so building an administrative or civil service from scratch was what it was going to have to do, and it is still a long way away from serviceability.

Let me give you an example. One of our priorities was to try and build up the health service—the healthcare sector—from an early stage. I worked very closely with the Minister of Health of that transitional Government—a lady who was attacked regularly for not wearing a scarf. The problem was that even when she took a decision, getting from the point of a ministerial decision to implementation required in the region of 36 signatures, so you had an administrative structure that was extremely difficult to get anything done in, because any

one of those 36 signatories, if they had a reason to object to a particular project, could hold it up. So the structure was paralysed in terms of its effectiveness, and no progress had been made on that one prior to my arrival.

Let me give you another example, on getting the economy going. There were, when I arrived, 11,000 contracts—that I was aware of; the latest figure I have seen is 17,000—that predated the revolution, which either would be taken to arbitration by companies, or anyway, would have to be resolved in one way or another, before they could proceed. Tripoli was notorious for having, in my recollection, the largest number of cranes that were static. Resolving those legacy problems from the Gaddafi era was making activity by the Executive extremely difficult. People were not used to taking decisions.

Q123 Mr Hendrick: With the benefit of hindsight, what would you have done differently that clearly didn't happen?

Sir Dominic Asquith: On the reconstruction side?

Mr Hendrick: Yes. You mentioned briefly the stabilisation force but said that you didn't feel there was the stomach for it at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, what do you think could or should have happened, such that we would not be in the situation that we are in now?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Greater precision could have been given to the incoming Government about what its priorities should be, focusing it with the degree of influence and pressure that we could bring to bear for it to focus on achieving a momentum of progress. There were no projects being implemented, hardly, around the country. One of the regular exchanges I would have—I would bring in my French and American colleagues on this, to demonstrate a concerted effort from international supporters—was to focus the Prime Minister and President Abdul Jalil separately, but on exactly the same terms, on the requirement for the Government and the NTC to demonstrate to the Libyan people that they were doing what a Government should do, which is focus on the priorities: make the schools better, make the hospitals operate, allow communications to proceed, let the airports and ports operate, and let the oil be pumped.

In hindsight, if we had focused on fewer practical achievables, brought in people who were capable of doing the practical stuff and exerted greater pressure on them to carry on and do that limited series of projects, we might have generated sufficient momentum for support behind the Government to have built.

Q124 Mr Hendrick: Do you think that was feasible, given the way in which the institutional structures had been swept away with the Gaddafi authority and Gaddafi Government? Finally, do you or do you not think that boots on the ground or a stabilisation force would have made a difference and ensured that when Government wanted something to happen, it actually happened, and it was not just process, planning and dreams that were not fulfilled?

Sir Dominic Asquith: On the first question about whether it was feasible, it would have required political courage and vision. Was it there? It was not demonstrated, but there is no question it would have required some courage.

I remain unsure at what point a stabilisation force, if it had been achievable in the domestic context of the countries that would have provided it, would have been best introduced. It would have had to be invited in by a Government, since there was not the international legal structure for it to happen.

Q125 Mr Hendrick: That is why I asked about the resolution. Do you think the resolution should have gone further?

Sir Dominic Asquith: That was unachievable, I think, in the international context. It is an interesting question, but I do not think we could have got any other resolution that went further. That is not a very helpful answer.

Q126 Chair: May I follow up on Mr Hendrick's question about the period of transition to democracy in early 2011-12? I return to the first question I put to you about a lack of understanding about what was happening on the ground, if I may, Sir Dominic, to push back a little bit. Would you agree that too much optimism was shown by us and others in the west at the election of the so-called moderates, thinking they were independent when, in reality, they were linked to one extremist group or another? Again, that illustrates the fact that we simply did not understand what was happening on the ground in those early elections.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I will make a couple of remarks. The timetable for the elections was set by the Libyans: 240 days after the declaration of liberation was the date on which they said elections needed to take place, as in the constitutional declaration. That was a pledge, made by the NTC to the Libyan people, which they considered important. It became increasingly a vulnerability of the NTC that they were not elected. In both cases, we were operating in a context where there were going to be elections.

On your question about whether we misread the outcome of the elections, I contest your assertion that we were naive and thought Islamists were independents. We did the calculation in the full knowledge that many independents were inclined towards the Muslim Brotherhood, but even Libyans themselves were unsure of the number that would move to that side of the Chamber once it was operational. In a 200-seat Chamber, my recollection is that the general consensus from the Libyans there was that 112 were sort of liberal—so just over a majority. But they and we were quite clear that that was a fragile calculation and that, in time, alliances might be built between the Muslim Brotherhood, or Islamist-inclined elements of the Assembly, and independents, so the numbers would fluctuate, and they would fluctuate on different issues. I remember well that the Foreign Secretary at the time came in just after the elections, in the middle of July, and I introduced him, purposely, to a broad-ish section of the people who had been elected. It was quite clear that there were problems ahead, in terms of what the mood or the centre of gravity of that Parliament would be. I do not think we were labouring under any illusions about how that Parliament could react.

Q127 Chair: May I briefly ask one further question on UN resolution 1973? It was a diplomatic coup in many respects at the time, but do you understand the frustration of, say, the Russians, the Chinese and the African Union, who think, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, that it was as much, or more, about regime change as it was about protecting the citizens of Benghazi, if you look at the action on the ground and the targeting of Gaddafi himself—even his Winnebago, for example? Certainly, there are major countries—permanent members of the UN and the African Union—that firmly believe it was just as much about

regime change as anything else. Do you understand that? Can you sympathise with it? If they were here before you, what would you say to them?

Sir Dominic Asquith: That Gaddafi had many opportunities thereafter, in the form of African Union trips into Libya, to step down. From our side, I would ask them to understand why there was a lack of trust in anything he may have promised to do.

Q128 Yasmin Qureshi: While you were ambassador there, did the interim Government ever ask for your opinion, advice or support about any issue? If you were asked, did you give them any advice and did they act on any of it?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Yes, daily—either the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister or Ministers. There was a very regular exchange, talking through their challenges. On the whole, it focused in their cases on either the general requirement to exert Executive authority to the degree that they could—though they were constrained, as I say, by the NTC as a quasi-Parliament and the highest authority—or it focused on specific projects that we were helping with. For example, there was training to help the Ministry of the Interior establish a structure that would deal with the police force, or to help the Minister of Health improve the healthcare system.

Did they take the advice? There was certainly a commonality of analysis at the end of those conversations and a frustration, very often on their part at the difficulty they had in carrying through their decisions.

Yasmin Qureshi: Before I forget, I will just say that it is great to see that you survived the assassination attempt and that you came back from Libya in one piece.

Sir Dominic Asquith: Thank you.

Q129 Daniel Kawczynski: You are now chairman of the Libyan British Business Council. I had the opportunity to address the Libya oil and gas conference last week at the Tower hotel. There was a lot of enthusiasm from Libyan and British representatives at that conference for getting the Libyan oil industry up and running again. But there are concerns about Foreign Office advice to British companies operating in that jurisdiction. First, could you tell us a little bit about the activities of the Libyan British Business Council? Secondly, what is your advice to a Shropshire business—a small engineering company or some such thing—that is trying to enter the Libyan market?

Sir Dominic Asquith: The business council is a bit of a hybrid in that it is not the normal business council; it is more like a chamber of commerce in the sense that it is supported by a membership. It has just about 100 members now. It was slightly larger before, but it is keeping going. These companies have a relatively long history of engagement in Libya, including before the revolution across the sectors; it is a good cross-section of British commercial activity.

We used to organise regularly trade missions into Libya. We have not for some time—we certainly have not since the displacement of the Government from Tripoli last summer because of the difficulty of dealing with what is not a recognised Government. Also,

to be honest, given the travel advice, it is difficult to mount a trade mission even if you had confidence of engagement at ministerial level from the Government in Tobruk or Bayda.

We have been looking at the possibility of mounting missions in third countries, where you get Libyans coming over and you would introduce British business to Libyans. That still remains on our agenda as an option, but to keep the membership going, we organise activities here in Britain, bringing members together for various events with Libyan speakers coming in from outside to explain to them or keep them in touch with the developments and what it looks like.

Once there is a Government, it will be easier to re-engage, because if you have a unity Government you should be able to get over this damaging contestation that has gone on in terms of the management of some of the key institutions: the central bank, the LIA and the NOC.

The advice at this stage is that unless you are already engaged in projects—some of them are already engaged in projects and contracts on the ground—it is important to position yourself for the point at which it becomes possible to do business again. That is what we try to facilitate as the business council: to keep them au courant with what is happening in Libya and with the people who will be relevant in the future.

Once it becomes possible to do business again, in my view there are two core requirements that business will have. One is a reassurance or a credible assurance that the Government of National Accord, or whatever it is that comes out, will be supported when it comes to power and once it comes under attack, because no business that I am aware of here will feel comfortable doing business with a Government that may disappear—be swamped or whatever—at the first sign of attack.

The second, very obviously, is to have assurance about the way that payments will be made in the event of a contract being signed. That is where some imaginative thought has been given, but how one might, as it were, hypothecate some of Libya's assets as guarantees of payment is a sensitive matter. That would need to be done with the approval of the Libyan Government at the time. In other words, if there are LIA assets or central bank assets or whatever it may be, it would be awkward if a foreign Government were to seize possession of them to pay British or French—whoever it may be—companies. But if they could be used as some sort of payment guarantee, there may be a way that a foreign company would feel assured that its payment would be forthcoming.

Q130 Daniel Kawczynski: To go back to the oil and gas industry, which is obviously Libya's No. 1 income generator, the opinion that I got from the conference was that the oil and gas fields are far more secure than is generally perceived and that many international companies are currently operating quite successfully within those areas. Is that your perspective? What would you say to British experts in the oil and gas sector?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I think there is a difference of view between some of the security companies that made presentations at that conference and the National Oil Company about the levels of security that existed in the fields. In a context where foreign oil companies will have examples such as In Amenas very much in their view, they will not want to expose their workers to the risk of a facility deep in Libya—In Amenas was in Algeria, but there

would be a similar risk—being possibly attacked in a country where there is not at this stage credible coverage in security terms of the terrain. Given the presence of Islamic State and other Islamist militias, there is a risk of an attack mounted against, in particular, foreign interests that would be producing the revenues for a Government that, I would hope, would be taking the battle against those Islamist jihadist groups. In that context, it wouldn't take much to work out that there was a serious risk.

I am not aware of a large number of foreign companies operating on the ground. That claim from the National Oil Company puzzled me. I would also say that the reality is that there is a difference in the perception of the risk between international oil companies and the National Oil Company, and that perception is an important reality. You cannot wish it away.

Q131 Daniel Kawczynski: Lastly, I am interested in your organisation's engagement with UKTI in terms of promoting Libya as a destination for inward investment when the appropriate juncture comes about. What sort of relationship, if any, do you have with UKTI?

Sir Dominic Asquith: You will see that it has an operation in Tunis that covers Libya. UKTI is increasingly pushing to the countries the responsibility for handling the commercial relationships between Britain and the country in question. When the UKTI officer currently situated in Tunis comes over to Britain, the business council will see him. When the British ambassador comes over the Britain, he will, as he did recently, address the business council as well. There is a collaboration between us and the British representation in Tunis that is relevant to Libya. I hope that once the unity Government are appointed that that collaboration will develop further. There are plans for that.

Q132 Yasmin Qureshi: You may be aware that last year's World

Bank statistics on the state of the Libyan economy appeared very alarming. How close is the Libyan economy to collapse? Is there any danger that the Tripoli or Tobruk administrations might run out of money?

Sir Dominic Asquith: The best calculation I have seen is that to cover running costs—I understand that there is virtually no capital expenditure being made by the Libyan Government, whatever you call it, based in Tripoli or Tobruk—requires the draw-down of something in the region of £1.5 billion a month. I think those are coming out of central bank funds. That calculation seems to make sense if you look at the running costs required and the amount of oil that they export. It is not a figure that the central bank will confirm, so I hazard that as a target figure. That would allow the central bank to continue for a few more years, but at subsistence level, not at a level at which Libya can function. So there is a concern that it will become very difficult to keep the country going. It might become an option to draw on what appears to be quite high liquidity levels in the local economy, in Libyan dinars, to keep the process going.

There is a question still unanswered in my mind about how equitable the division of revenues out of the central bank is between the administrations in Tripoli and in Tobruk/Bayda. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that Tobruk and Bayda are less well served in terms of revenues, but I have no first-hand evidence to prove that one way or the other.

Q133 Chair: I shall bring us on to the UN-sponsored peace talks, if I may. There is a concern that we are not making much progress. We know we need a political settlement to deal with extremists in the country, to encourage the Libyan economy to prosper and to provide a bedrock of support for the Libyan people themselves when it comes to security. What is your assessment of the current state of play?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I have very strong views about it, but I am conscious that political negotiations are at a particularly sensitive point and I do not want anything I say to be used by one side or the other to make them more difficult. I would be very happy, in a private session, to explain my concerns in more detail, but please allow me to limit myself to the following observations.

There remains a very strong desire from the Libyan people for a political agreement. They want a Government. They want a political settlement. There is huge frustration at their own political leadership, but also at the UN and, more broadly, the international community, that they have not managed to secure such a political agreement. The demonstration in Benghazi on Friday was the latest example of that frustration and after it was attacked, the comment from people in Benghazi about the UN and the continued unity of Libya was deeply disturbing. It has got nastier. There is an acute danger of the violence getting worse and there is a serious risk of the country splitting if there is not a political agreement.

This is where I stray into a sensitive matter. It is essential that the UN restores trust from the parties, particularly the elected House of Representatives and the Government that they appointed in the east. They initialled, as did others in Tripoli, an agreement that emerged on 11 July. They were dismayed to see a very different text emerge out of the UN on 8 October, but that came at the end of a series of to-ing and fro-ing between the negotiators—between the House of Representatives in Tobruk and the UN—over the past year, where they sensed that too much weight was given to those who displaced them from Tripoli. In my view, there is unquestionably a requirement to rebuild trust.

I suggest that, if we are going to reach a political agreement, the next stage will require a more collaborative, concerted and decisive operation by the international community, of which the UN would clearly be part, but in the sort of Dayton model, where it sits the people down and does not let them out of the room until there is an agreement.

Q134 Chair: Can I come back to you on that? The factors and forces at play on the ground have been known for some time, including the major players. There is concern that some of the key players have not been included in the talks. I appreciate that you are in a slightly delicate situation, but where do you lay the criticism for the lack of progress? We do not seem to be much further down the road towards forming a Government of National Accord. Where would you lay the criticism for that? I know that there is a variety of forces, but there must be a priority in your own mind.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I will go back to the 11 July agreement that was initialled. At that point the negotiations had been going on since September the previous year. An agreement was initialled, and I would have argued that that was the point at which the international community said collectively, “That’s the agreement that we’re going to get behind and the Government that emerges from it will be the Government with which we

operate.” That did not happen. Peculiarly, three months later, a very different agreement emerges from the UN that, to an outsider, appears to have had no substance in a negotiated exchange between it and, at least, the guys in Tobruk.

Q135 Chair: Okay, so, not to beat about the bush, you would say that, given that these are UN-sponsored negotiations, the fault lies with the UN.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would not want, in public, to put my view of where the responsibility lies.

Q136 Chair: Before I bring in other Members, may I suggest something? I think you would like to share more with the Committee, but perhaps not in a public session. With the Committee’s approval, after we have finished this session I would like to go into a closed session. We will clear the room and then have a chat. Would you welcome that?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would appreciate that.

Q137 Daniel Kawczynski: You referred to Dayton—

Sir Dominic Asquith: Illustratively.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thought also of Lancaster House and Rhodesia. If the talks are unsuccessful, should the United Kingdom instigate Lancaster House talks to try to bring about what the UN has so far failed to do?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would be receptive to that, for the following reason. For a number of years I have heard regularly from Libyans since the revolution—and it is cumulatively, so I think there is substance; they are not just being polite—that the United Kingdom is trusted and they wish it would play a leading role. There is a greater wish that the UK would play that role than some of the other leading candidates.

I think there would be a receptivity in Libya to that. It would be very difficult to work out how that would be feasible, to use the word you referred to, in a context where the UN has been given the responsibility to lead on the negotiations. It would need careful attention to how to achieve that. To go back to what was implicit in your line of questioning, if we were to accept that responsibility, we would have to accept the likelihood that there may be a requirement for some enforcement action.

Q138 Daniel Kawczynski: With all respect to Mr León and his efforts—I am sure he is doing sterling work—he is not a household name by any regard. If it fails, I believe—and I hope that you agree—that the United Kingdom, given our unique position in the liberation of the country and the good way that Libyans see this country, would be able to provide somebody of an international standing, respected by the Libyans and the international community, to get everybody round the table and put some sort of an agreement together.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I was having a conversation with a Libyan earlier today precisely on that subject.

Q139 Daniel Kawczynski: This is what I have written to our own Prime Minister about, saying that if León fails that is what we need to do.

Sir Dominic Asquith: Two things. When do you declare failure? We have had a number of deadlines—I have lost track of how many—but the deadline is always extended. There is clearly a strong desire from the international community to keep the political negotiations going, come what may. Despite the latest deadline being crossed, I suspect they are still in play, even though it raises interesting questions about who has legitimate authority in Libya today. So, when do you declare failure?

Secondly, I come back to that question. If we are to accept that lead responsibility, and I agree with you that there are many people in Libya who would be happy for Britain to take a leadership role with a significant figure as you envisaged, it comes with likely commitments.

Q140 Daniel Kawczynski: Finally, there is something I wanted to say to you. When you were ambassador, and building on for the future of Libya, its stability and consensus, I hope you have lobbied authorities that people such as Mr Senussi and Saif Gaddafi should not be put to death.

Sir Dominic Asquith: I have done it in that context and in an earlier context in Iraq with the case of Saddam. On Senussi, I do not think he had been arrested when I was there, so it was just Saif.

Q141 Mike Gapes: I want to take you back to your remark just now about the UK playing a central pivotal role. You said that would come with likely commitments. Given that you said earlier that there was a need for a stabilisation force, are we talking about a negotiation process that includes a mechanism that requires power and authority not yet available within Libya? That raises all kinds of political implications. The parallel with Dayton does not work, because the United States was a very strong power and effectively Milosevic and everybody else were facing a gun pointed at their heads. The internal dynamics of the Bosnian Serbs and the Croats were such that they knew that there was power there, and that the United States had power. The big problem here, surely, is that there is an absence of power. We made a decision to bomb, but no ground forces. The European Union has played a role here, but there is no power on the ground, and that is one of the reasons why we are getting the refugee crisis, with people coming across the Mediterranean for that same reason. Would you agree?

Sir Dominic Asquith: Yes, I would. It has been my argument for some time that in the context—taking it up to the modern stage—of any political agreement, a piece of paper that is not enforceable is worse than the current state of affairs. We would have raised expectations of a solution only for them to fall much more violently when that Government is first attacked—as it will be, because some people will be opposed to it—and you cannot be confident that it will have the capability to resist that attack. Therefore, unless we are prepared to come to its defence, we will fail.

Q142 Mike Gapes: You have confirmed in your previous answers that this Government of National Accord process is indeed travel. If it fails and it is impossible to form a Government of National Accord, is there a plan B? In your earlier answer, you said that the country might

break up and fragment. Are we talking about fragmentation into two countries or centres, or are we talking about more than that?

Sir Dominic Asquith: It could be into two. It is unclear where the south would go, but there is a reasonable assumption that they could side with the west in the current context, so it could be just in two. I do not want to overplay the risk of separation or division in the country, but if the political process has palpably failed in the eyes of the people in the east—and in the eyes of the people in the west—yes, I am conscious that the rhetoric is becoming sharper on both sides to let the other one go its own way.

Is there a plan B? I am not the person to ask.

Q143 Mike Gapes: If that were to be the outcome, is it correct to say that the Libyan people collectively would have been better off if there had been no intervention and that the appalling, brutal Gaddafi regime had still been there?

Sir Dominic Asquith: No, I do not think so.

Q144 Mike Gapes: So even a failed state and fragmentation is better than Gaddafi.

Sir Dominic Asquith: A split state, if both parts are operating and they come to a modus vivendi, would be preferable to Gaddafi presiding over a unitary state.

Q145 Mike Gapes: But the continuation of a conflict over a state that does not actually provide a solution—perhaps indefinitely everyone is fighting for the whole cake, rather than agreeing to divide it—would that be worse?

Sir Dominic Asquith: I am not a Libyan, and you can only ask that question of Libyans, but Libyans whom I have spoken to would prefer not to have Gaddafi.

Mike Gapes: Still.

Sir Dominic Asquith: As would—no, go on.

Mike Gapes: As would Iraqis.

Sir Dominic Asquith: As would some Iraqis—some.

Mike Gapes: Shi'as and Kurds at least—yes, I have heard that, I understand that. Thank you very much.

Q146 Chair: I have one final question, if I may, before we go into private session. I think it is generally accepted that our intervention has not gone as planned with regards to the consequent events. As a Committee we touched on various aspects of those events, whether the emergence of jihadist extremists, vicious civil war or casualties and so forth. You very kindly answered a series of questions from Committee members, but if I asked you to try to summarise briefly and list in priority order why events have taken the turn they have and why it has not really gone to plan, could you share those thoughts with us now? I stress as briefly as possible, Sir Dominic, because I want to move us into private session.

Sir Dominic Asquith: Subcontracting to the UN the responsibility for reconstructing Libya, with the UN approaching that in the way that it did—it was perfectly understandable that it should do so—presented a problem in so far as there was not a prescriptive approach to a Libyan Government that was short on capacity. And there was not effective leverage out of a very willing international community to provide that assistance. So the structure of the UN/EU presiding over the reconstruction was the first problem.

Early on, before my time, in Benghazi there were early mistakes made by the Libyan leadership in terms of giving militias a role in establishing security of the state, which was replicated once Tripoli fell in August and particularly in October 2011 when there was a higher security council which in effect became the operating base for the Islamist militias. They were provided, therefore, the opening and authority in the capital for security. We were therefore constructing a Ministry of the Interior and a Ministry of Defence in a context where there were agents inside those Ministries determined not to let a national institution be established, because their benefits were better served by having disparate elements loyal to other people.

Our inability to correct that was when we lost the ability, as it were, to buy in the militias. The plan was to give them salaries from the central Government and in return for them to be loyal to be central Government rather than to a militia leader or a factional leader. Collectively, the Libyan leadership and the international community failed, for a variety of reasons, to be able to manage that. As soon as we lost control of the militias—I think the latest figure is 200,000 and something: a ridiculous number of people on the payroll as providing security—it was very difficult to create the conditions for a Government of any kind to be able to exercise its role as the Executive, if, as regularly happens, the Prime Minister and his Ministers were taken hostage by armed groups.

But I think there was a key bit after I left—I have this only from hearsay, but it makes sense—when Chris Stevens, the American ambassador, was killed and the people came out into the street to protest against the activities of the militia. I think that was a point at which, if the international community had come in and made clear that they were going to support the streets and protect a Government from the activities of the militia, we might have turned the tide.

Q147 Chair: A very brief response, please, Sir Dominic. It seems that some of your answers are linked by a central theme that: a lack of understanding of what was happening on the ground. That is certainly the impression that a number of other witnesses have—

Sir Dominic Asquith: I would say a lack of being able to assess accurately how people would react. It is a human problem, I think, rather than a data problem.

Chair: Great. May I publicly thank you for your time, Sir Dominic? We will move into private session, and I am afraid everyone but the Committee, the witnesses and the Committee staff will have to leave.