



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

HC 520

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Members present:

Crispin Blunt (Chair); Mr John Baron; Stephen Gethins; Mr Mark Hendrick; Mr Adam Holloway; Daniel Kawczynski; Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 148-174

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Lord Hague of Richmond**, former Foreign Secretary, and **Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox**, former Defence Secretary, gave evidence.

Q148 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, a continuation of taking evidence on the examination of the intervention in and collapse of Libya and the United Kingdom's future policy options there. Our witnesses hardly need identification, but would you like formally to identify yourselves for the record?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Lord Hague of Richmond, Foreign Secretary from 2010 to 2014.

Dr Fox: Liam Fox, MP for North Somerset, and Defence Secretary 2010-11.

Chair: There is a possibility that we will be interrupted by a Division at 3.30 pm. I know that you are anxious to get away at 4.15 pm. We will try to cut through this as far as we possibly can.

William, through the 2000s, the UK pursued a policy of reconciliation with Colonel Gaddafi. By March 2011 we were bombing Libya. When did the policy change?

Lord Hague of Richmond: I think it changed only in late February 2011. We pursued broadly the same policy on coming to office in the coalition Government in 2010 as had been pursued by the previous Labour Administration. There were some differences on Libya policy—we had been more critical in opposition of the release back to Libya of the Lockerbie bomber—but broadly policy remained the same. Indeed, I met the then Libyan Foreign Minister, Musa Kusa, who subsequently defected from the Gaddafi regime, at the UN General Assembly in September 2010, and we agreed to subsequent meetings and contact. So

the policy of engagement remained, until the days of mid to late February 2011, when the Gaddafi regime started to fire on unarmed protesters and various other deeds.

Q149 Chair: When would we have developed a new strategy that underpinned our new approach to Libya?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Well, then. From mid-February 2011 onwards, that was a new situation, and I think to most observers an unexpected one, despite events in neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia—but those were the events of only the previous few weeks. The development of a new strategy was from the beginning of the fighting in Libya.

Q150 Chair: This is a question to both of you: would you describe the new Libya strategy in 2011 as the product of detailed political and military planning?

Dr Fox: There was fairly detailed planning as a consequence of the actions, and in particular following the 21 February 2011 attack on civilians in Benghazi. There was a coincidence of two things on that one day. One was Gaddafi's 70-minute diatribe on TV against his own people—if you remember, he was talking about how he was going to repeat some of the crimes of history, praising Tiananmen Square, Waco and the destruction of Fallujah, and saying that he was going to visit this on Benghazi. On the night of 21 February, Libyan special forces landed in Benghazi and attacked with hammers and swords the protesters who were camping outside the courthouse, who included senior lawyers and judges. It was very clear what was about to happen. There was increased planning following that, as we led up to the UN resolution, and of course it was accelerated by events in France, which recognised the NTC as the legitimate Government of Libya, which again pushed the process forward, in March.

Lord Hague of Richmond: I would just add to that that there was a great deal of planning from the events that Liam is talking about, which meant that by the time we came to take military action in the second half of March, there were good plans for it, which is one reason why that action followed very swiftly on the passing of the UN Security Council resolution, the Cabinet meeting and the Prime Minister's coming to the House of Commons.

Q151 Chair: Liam, what was your understanding of the view of the Ministry of Defence and the Chiefs of Staff on this new strategy?

Dr Fox: It would be fair to say that the military, as is very often the case, did not want to be drawn into a conflict unnecessarily. Certainly for my own part, I was keen that we would not see military operations unless required, but I think that all of us felt collectively that when we saw the threat that was very clearly apparent to the civilians of Benghazi, our hand had been forced on that. Had Gaddafi taken his forces back west at that point and not threatened Benghazi and its civilian population, that might have changed the attitude towards a UN resolution and conflict might even have been avoided at that point, but he was the architect of what came to be his own destruction.

Q152 Mr Baron: Concerns were expressed at the time that we simply did not have sufficient intelligence on the ground to tell us what was actually going on—in other words, to give us an informed view of the factors and the militias in play. There is little doubt that there was quite a big change. We knew, for example, that Colonel Gaddafi was a hard man. He had put

down people before—protesters—so it was not a revelation that he was suddenly putting down more innocent civilians. He had a long and hard track record in this respect. One accepts that Benghazi may have been a factor in that change, but can you give us more idea as to what intelligence we had? One does not want to know national secrets, but what intelligence did we have about the factors in play on the ground at the time? Because there is a general feeling that we simply did not have sufficient resource to understand fully the factors in play and the militias that were opposing Gaddafi—for example, the fact that those militias could splinter into a thousand pieces once Gaddafi was gone. How confident were you that what you were being fed by way of intelligence was actually right?

Lord Hague of Richmond: I will begin answering that with a couple of cautionary notes about intelligence. One is that no one would have had the intelligence to give them all the information, including the Gaddafi regime in their own country. Remember, these revolutions—Egypt, Tunisia, Libya—were not foreseen, even days before, by the regimes in those countries, with massive intelligence services. They did not understand the militias, the tribes, the movements and what was happening in their own country, so there is not much hope that a foreign intelligence service would have a more profound understanding.

What did we know about the situation? We knew quite a lot. There are things that you can gain, without going into details, from electronic and satellite intelligence about roughly what is going on, and of course we had a lot of contact with people in Libya at the time. Certainly, it was clear that this was a very different situation from previous human rights abuses by the Gaddafi regime. In the days before we passed the UN Security Council resolution, there was very widespread fighting. Regime forces were advancing towards Benghazi. It was the view of the Arab League that this required an outside intervention and it was the desperate view of many Libyans themselves, particularly, obviously, in the National Transitional Council. It would have been a tremendous gamble to say, “Actually, Gaddafi is going to get Benghazi with his forces and not hurt many people.” That was not the view of many people in Libya, who were trying to flee Benghazi in large numbers at the time. They thought they knew what was going to happen to them.

Q153 Mr Baron: Briefly, the Committee has had evidence that suggests that the full text of what Gaddafi had said was that he was going to slaughter “the bearded ones”—in other words, the jihadist extremists—which brings us back to the issue of intelligence. Can I ask both of you, with the benefit of what we know now, what would you have changed in the strategy? Would you have still intervened as we did?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Yes. We faced the imminent possibility, in effect on the borders of Europe, of very widespread bloodshed. There was an international request for assistance and intervention, and facing that possibility or probability in a situation where you can intervene—of course, there may be other situations where you do not have the means to intervene—I think that is the right thing to do. That is not to say, as the Committee will know, that everything subsequently turned out to our satisfaction, to put it mildly, but I think it was the right decision to take and I would take it again.

Dr Fox: In medicine, we always say the most useful instrument is a retrospectoscope. That certainly applies to politics as well. What struck me, going back and looking at the ministerial papers in preparation for this meeting, was the speed at which events were moving. To talk about what intelligence we were getting, there was a period of very rapid

change; we had seen what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, and we hoped that there would be a peaceful transition in Libya. It turned out that that was not happening. When we talked about the militias, remember we were seeing pictures of doctors, lawyers and bakers in Benghazi taking up weapons with no training whatsoever. It was an issue that we came to when the House of Commons Defence Committee did the investigation about who were combatants and who were non-combatants. What was a soldier and what was not a soldier was a question that we came to when we had to supply body armour and get legal advice on that.

It was a very fluid picture. The question at the time was not just, “Was it the right thing to intervene, and what would the consequences be of intervening?” but, “What might be the consequences of not intervening?” I think people remembered what happened in the Balkans, and neither politicians in London nor politicians in other European capitals, Washington, or many of the Arab capitals were willing to take the risk of seeing the wholesale slaughter of civilians when we perhaps could have done something about it before. There was a fear of, if you like, another Srebrenica on our hands that was very much a driving factor in the decision making at the time.

Q154 Chair: If the mission was about protecting civilians, rather than regime change, why did the bombing not stop once Gaddafi’s forces had retreated from Benghazi?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Gaddafi’s forces remained a clear danger to civilians. Having been beaten back, they were not then going to sit quietly and accept the situation—indeed, they showed the intention and the capability to counter-attack whenever they could. We know, both from what happened in 2011 and from the history of warfare in Libya—in cities in the second world war—how rapidly the situation can swing from one side to the other, because of the vast, empty distances. So I think it was very necessary to carry on the operation if we were going to protect civilians, and the whole of NATO was absolutely united about that.

Q155 Chair: So it remained about protecting civilians and not knocking over the regime.

Lord Hague of Richmond: Protecting civilians did mean knocking out the military capabilities of the regime, starting with the air defences, without which the rest of the operation could not be done. It would not be possible to protect the civilian population of Libya while there were significant armed forces of the regime able to operate, function and travel around in Libya.

Q156 Chair: So at that point, it becomes a matter of their potential, not what they are actually doing.

Lord Hague of Richmond: It certainly includes their potential. Absolutely.

Dr Fox: The first element, of course, with the no-fly zone, was the essential degradation of their command and control in terms of their air power, but it moved from there to what the Americans described as the transition from the no-fly zone to the no-drive zone, because there was a continued threat against civilians. We saw on a fairly regular basis that Libyan Government troops were continuing to attack civilians. The view was taken that the UN resolution said to take all possible measures to protect civilians, and that meant a constant

degradation of command and control across the country. That meant not just in the east of the country, but in Tripoli. I visited Misrata and saw for myself the dreadful suffering that the civilians there were enduring at the hands of the Libyan Government, notwithstanding the fact that the UN motion had already been passed for some time.

Lord Hague of Richmond: May I just add one point to that, because the point about Misrata is very important? The fighting was not just going on near Benghazi. There was serious fighting outside Misrata and on the borders of Tunisia, so it was actually a multi-front conflict going on. Being able just to confine Gaddafi's forces to one part of Libya would not have protected the civilians of Libya.

Q157 Mr Holloway: I remember driving down to the frontline past all those armoured vehicles, and it was extraordinary, because the countryside ended very abruptly and then it was the city, and they were right there on the edge of the city. What did you think was going to happen if they had been able to go on into the city?

Lord Hague of Richmond: No one can know for sure what was going to happen. Their stated intention, from Gaddafi himself, was to go house to house, room to room, exacting their revenge on the people of Benghazi. Mr Holloway knows very well, because he has been there, that this is a city of hundreds of thousands of people; it is not a village. We are talking about vast numbers of people, many of whom would resist. There was therefore the possibility of immense bloodshed. It would be a brave assumption, given the history of Gaddafi, the situation and the disposition of forces, that his army would drive into Benghazi and they would all behave like pussycats. A lot of people were going to die.

Dr Fox: We did not have to imagine particularly hard, because we had seen what the special forces did to those in the tented camp: tearing down the tents and attacking them with hammers and swords. There were contemporary reports of people throwing themselves off bridges to escape from the forces. Gaddafi himself said on 21 February, "We are coming tonight. Prepare yourselves. We will find you in your closets. There will be no mercy or compassion for those who fight." We had already seen what the Gaddafi regime was capable of. He was making it very clear what would happen if their troops went into the city. It is arguable whether they would actually have done it or whether he was bluffing, but that was not something that the international community was willing to take a risk on.

Q158 Daniel Kawczynski: I want to probe you both specifically on regime change. Saif Gaddafi, the son and heir apparent, had spent a great deal of time in the United Kingdom and had been feted by various politicians. Did you interact with him at all, ahead of the intervention, to try to use him as a way of communicating with Gaddafi?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Yes. I didn't know him. He had never been feted by me.

Q159 Daniel Kawczynski: I am sure you know who I mean.

Lord Hague of Richmond: Boy, do I know who you mean, Mr Kawczynski. He called me as the trouble began. I remember it being a Sunday; I was sitting in my home in Yorkshire when I got a request to speak to Saif Gaddafi, and I said, "Yes, put the call through." He came on the line to say that there was now an alarming situation in Libya, and on behalf of his Government he was asking the United Kingdom and the West to help them to

suppress the rebellion in Libya, which showed that, whatever the understanding of Libyan politics developed in Britain, his understanding of British politics was not very profound after all these visits.

I cannot see any British Government supporting the suppression of a rebellion accompanied by human rights abuses on a vast scale. I said, “No, we will not be able to do that.” We looked to the Libyan Government to have a political process, to cease firing on unarmed protestors and to create a democratic process in Libya. Having received that message, he did not call back again, but we imparted that message directly to him on the telephone.

Q160 Daniel Kawczynski: Did you suggest to him that perhaps the only way out for his family, or for his father, would be for him to take over?

Lord Hague of Richmond: No. First, it would have been unwise for the British Foreign Secretary to suggest an internal coup within the Gaddafi Administration, particularly as the successor might have been no better than the predecessor.

Q161 Chair: We have quite a lot of form across the Middle East.

Lord Hague of Richmond: Not in my time in office. You are going back a little further. Those days are gone, certainly in my recollection. So, returning to the previous question, I think such a suggestion would have been unwise but, in any case, our concentration was on urging whoever was in charge of the Gaddafi regime to change course immediately, since they were producing a catastrophic situation for their country.

Q162 Daniel Kawczynski: You were rather surprised and taken aback by just how little he understood of how our country operated and what our intentions were, despite all his visits to the United Kingdom?

Lord Hague of Richmond: He had clearly formed a view during his visits to the UK over the years that this was a friendly country, and that a friendly country with which you have personal relationships will intervene on your behalf when you are in trouble. Of course, that is not quite how we see things in the United Kingdom. We have our own standards, our human rights laws and a Parliament. It is a far more complex situation. I think he was under a misapprehension about that, but he was not under it for many minutes.

Q163 Daniel Kawczynski: Dr Fox, would you like to comment on that?

Dr Fox: No, it was not my area of responsibility, but I do remember at the time finding it bizarre to read in what might have been the *New York Times*—forgive me if that was not the newspaper—a story that said, “Gaddafi seeks imperialist power’s help to crush Islamist uprising in the east.” Again, I think it was evident then that they were capable of making phenomenal miscalculations about the intent of the international community and where we would sit on issues like that.

Q164 Daniel Kawczynski: My second question is about the capture of Colonel Gaddafi and how he came to his demise. I saw President Putin quoted saying something along the lines of, “Who gave the British or the others involved the authority to kill Colonel Gaddafi?” It is certainly President Putin’s perception that we deliberately went out there to eliminate Colonel

Gaddafi. Certainly in the UN resolution, there was no reference to his killing. When we look at the way in which he was captured and then his subsequent death, Lord Hague, can you give us an unequivocal assertion that the British Government at no stage actively sought his elimination?

Lord Hague of Richmond: It is nice of you to address the question to me, but targeting matters are in the control of the Defence Secretary.

Q165 Daniel Kawczynski: It is to you and to you, Dr Fox.

Lord Hague of Richmond: It was our policy, as part of protecting civilians, to degrade the command posts of the Libyan forces. He could have been present at some of those, but Liam will have a far more precise recollection and responsibility for targeting matters.

Dr Fox: It was not within the UN resolution to specifically target individuals, but we did regard it as within our remit to target command and control centres. If some of the individuals whom we regarded as leaders of the regime happened to be there, that was their tough luck. We targeted the capabilities, not the individuals. We knew where Gaddafi had been regularly in the past, but our consideration was not an attempt to get any specific individuals; it was to take out their command and control capabilities. I remember the Defence Select Committee raised this issue and talked about Gaddafi's residence in Tripoli, which most people would regard as a military installation. When we were targeting that, we were targeting what was a very high level command and control centre. The fact that he used it as a residence simultaneously was really not the point at issue. So no, he was not specifically targeted, but if his residence was being used as a command and control centre, that was a legitimate target.

Q166 Daniel Kawczynski: I understand that—it is perfectly legitimate—but if I were to home in on the last few minutes of his life, he was in a convoy driving away from Sirte into the desert. Our planes attacked his convoy; they abandoned their cars and he hid in a tunnel. He was then found by some troops on the ground, who captured him and shot him through the head. Was there any specific British targeting of him there, in conjunction with rebels on the ground, to deliberately kill him at that point?

Dr Fox: I left the Government four or five days before Gaddafi was killed, so I cannot answer specifically for what happened on the day, but I can say that it was always regarded as a general rule that we did not target individuals.

Q167 Chair: Lord Hague, were there any reports to you of British involvement in his death?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Nothing beyond what Liam has said, absolutely. British aircraft or other NATO aircraft would attack a military convoy on the move.

Q168 Chair: I wasn't thinking about British aircraft.

Lord Hague of Richmond: No, nothing else.

Q169 Chair: There were no reports to you of British involvement in his death.

Lord Hague of Richmond: No.

Q170 Nadhim Zahawi: The Libyan intervention was the first test of the National Security Council. Do you think it functioned effectively?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Yes, I do. The National Security Council, particularly in what became known as NSCL or the Libya Sub-Committee of the National Security Council, met many times—the record will be available of how many meetings there were, but I think there were dozens of meetings in this period, usually several meetings a week—functioned well in bringing together military and intelligence chiefs with the Ministers of the day, which meant we all had a good understanding of where we were and what the strategy was. There were healthy discussions about this, so I think it was a case of the NSC working very well.

Dr Fox: There was the NSC, the NSCL and there was an NSCLO, for officials, and the NSCLO met even more frequently than the NSCL, so there was a constant feed into the process. To that extent, I completely agree that it worked. It had its interesting sub-findings as well, not least that some days into the conflict, when we were being presented with our military maps of where the forces were, in red and green, officials discovered for the first time that neither the Defence Secretary nor the Foreign Secretary could differentiate red and green.

Lord Hague of Richmond: We are both colour blind.

Dr Fox: We then had to change our entire presentations into blue and yellow, and so before long the NSCL did a passable impersonation of the Van Gogh Museum. That was an interesting finding.

Q171 Nadhim Zahawi: At any of those meetings, was there ever a discussion of the UK national interest in intervening in Libya?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Yes, absolutely. Indeed, the decision to intervene if a UN resolution could be passed was taken at a meeting of the NSC. This truly was the end of sofa Government in these matters. The decision was taken in the NSC with all relevant people present, and I remember the Prime Minister summing up the meeting and saying, “The key question is this: is it in the British national interest, if this is about to happen in Benghazi and this conflict is happening in this way, for us to intervene? That is the question we have to decide.” And having taken opinions from all around the room, he concluded that it was. So that was specifically the terms of the NSC decision.

Q172 Nadhim Zahawi: Can you share with us some of those opinions, or the arguments that were put forward?

Lord Hague of Richmond: Well, I’m not sure how much I am at liberty, as a former member of the Government, to disclose, many years before the minutes are published, the different opinions expressed in the National Security Council. There was a range of views—let me say that. Liam has referred to the fact that there is always caution from the military end, and there should be, about a new and extensive military operation. It is important that they remind Governments that the Army is committed in Afghanistan, and other things are going on, so that this can work out in many different ways.

Q173 Chair: Perhaps we can put it this way: have both of you read “Cameron at 10” by Anthony Seldon, or the relevant extracts of it?

Lord Hague of Richmond: No.

Q174 Chair: You’ve not read it?

Lord Hague of Richmond: I might have contributed to it, but that doesn’t mean I’ve read it. *[Laughter.]*

Chair: That is certainly the case.

Dr Fox: I have not read it, but in answer to the question there were a number of balances being looked at. One was that, clearly, we already had a deployment in Afghanistan. We had just gone through SDSR 2010. Would this have an impact on our military planning, and if so how much? Given that we were already committed in Afghanistan, what would the impact be?

Against that there was the question: “What if the international community thinks that the potential for slaughter of civilians is sufficient to go ahead with a UN resolution that backs a no-fly zone, and Britain is absent from it? Where would that leave us in terms of our national interest and our international projection of prestige and power?” *[Interruption.]*

Chair: We now have a problem, because the advice that I am getting is that there will be several votes; “several” implies that there will be at least three, which will take us neatly to 4.15 pm, which is the time you have said you would finish. So, you are either able to reschedule whatever it is you have for 4.15pm and we will recommence as soon as the votes are over, or—given that we are rather less than a third of the way through the session—we can reconvene all together on a future date.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.