



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; Mr Mark Hendrick; Mr Adam Holloway; Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 314-407

Examination of Witness

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, gave evidence.

Q314 Chair: Welcome to this further meeting as part of the FAC's examination of the interventions in Libya, its collapse and our future policy options. Thank you very much indeed, Lord Richards, for coming to give evidence to us.

Protecting civilians was the stated motivation for our intervention in Libya. Does that mean that Britain was disinterested in the outcome of the Libyan civil war as long as civilians were protected?

Lord Richards: I think that might have been the view initially, but without doubt one thing morphed almost ineluctably into the other as people realised that in order to protect civilians you almost certainly had to confront Colonel Gaddafi and his regime. Depending on whether one took advantage of what I might describe as checkpoints during the campaign when politics could have reasserted itself, at some point it became clear to me, and I think to everyone else, that to achieve the protection of the civilians you had to deal with the regime, and that probably meant changing it.

Q315 Chair: Except that, in Sir Anthony Seldon's phrase, there was the suggestion that you might have wanted to "call it quits" after Benghazi was secured and that we should have negotiated with Gaddafi.

Lord Richards: Well, as ever in these books, that is not exactly accurate. With those checkpoints, I did try to build something into the military campaign, believing that if you could create an environment in which politics could reassert itself, that would be a good thing. I felt that my political masters and those in America and Europe should at least have

had an opportunity to pause, perhaps have a ceasefire and have another go at the political process. I think that is what Sir Anthony Seldon is getting at. I wasn't saying "call it quits", I said, "pause".

After Benghazi we had achieved the immediate aim of preventing Benghazi's collapse and the potential massacre of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of civilians. Would we then be able to persuade Gaddafi to negotiate? If not, and the risk to civilians was still considerable, we might have to start the military campaign again. That was what I was talking about.

Q316 Chair: But there was no pause at all, was there? Indeed, it just ramped straight up. By mid-April, you had the President of the United States, the President of France and the Prime Minister putting their names to a joint article saying, "Gaddafi has to go".

Lord Richards: Absolutely. It wasn't entirely in our gift, because, of course, we didn't have any ground troops there. I think we could have insisted on a ceasefire of some kind, because they were dependent on our support, but in fact the momentum was behind the anti-Gaddafi groupings on the whole, so they didn't feel the need to stop anyway.

Q317 Chair: But we were their air force, in effect. We had people embedded with them. Our air power campaign ran on for six months, with, presumably, increasing effectiveness because of the people we had embedded with the NTC.

Lord Richards: We had a few people embedded with them. Not up front, so to speak, but back in the rear areas. People would go forward and back, but we were obviously very cautious about the risk to them. We did not have that sort of influence over them, even if we had wanted it. That said, you are essentially right: at some point regime change, in shorthand, became the accepted means of ensuring that the civilian population of Libya would not be threatened into the long term, so it became, as I said, an ineluctable change of mission, for me.

Q318 Chair: But our deployment of our air power ensured the outcome. You equipped the NTC with western air power, which was helpfully directed by people on the ground—our people who were embedded, or whatever the appropriate detail is—and that ensured that there was only one ending to this civil war.

Lord Richards: I think probably, but air power is a facilitator, not a guarantee of victory. From what I have read—you may, I absolutely accept, know this already—the role of the ground forces, as you will know from your own background, is ultimately critical. Therefore, while air power was vital, and I would not deny that for one minute, if the militias and our Arab allies had not been there playing a key role, I am not so certain that air power would have resulted in Gaddafi's downfall in the way it did.

Q319 Chair: In the planning that you were party to on the National Security Council, were you planning on the basis that we would have regime change?

Lord Richards: Not initially. It was very clear that the sequential operation was a non-combatant evacuation operation, which was phase 1, and then phase 2 was to prevent Benghazi falling. That was very much focused on preventing a massacre of civilians in

Benghazi. I was cautious about what might come after that, but I was 150% behind the Prime Minister and my political leaders, when confronted with the evidence that they felt we could not ignore, that that was more than likely. I think we all felt it would be on our consciences if we had not acted. Straight after that in our campaign plan—not accepted by our allies—was a pause to negotiate.

Q320 Chair: The British campaign plan.

Lord Richards: In the military strategic plan, we had built in a pause after Benghazi if we were successful on Benghazi.

Q321 Chair: Whose military?

Lord Richards: Ours. Within the armed forces, and it was communicated, obviously, to the National Security Council.

Q322 Chair: So this was a British military plan. It was not a military plan with the French and British militaries together.

Lord Richards: No, and that was the trouble. We did build in a pause, as I think you would expect us to do. It is time-honoured Clausewitzian doctrine. That was not accepted more widely, and it did not really, because of the speed of events, get much traction here in London, but we did build it in. Then, almost straight away, it became change of regime—you are right—followed by a stabilisation phase. So it was a five-phase campaign.

Q323 Chair: This was a particularly un-Clausewitzian campaign, if I can put it like that.

Lord Richards: It became one, one could argue. But if you are now talking about the stabilisation phase and our inability to do that properly, despite all the lessons we learned in Iraq and we are still learning in Afghanistan, those were for other reasons. It was not because there wasn't a plan; implementing the plan was the problem.

Q324 Nadhim Zahawi: Lord Richards, welcome. The Libya intervention was the first test—the first outing—for the new National Security Council. In your view, did it function effectively as a formal mechanism to shape decision making?

Lord Richards: I think it did, generally. I tease my political masters that we met far too often—I think it was about 50 or 60 meetings—but it was a very important operation for relatively new political leadership, and they wanted to understand what we were doing. I would tease them; I would say to the Prime Minister, “Just give us your intent, Prime Minister, and let us deliver on it.” He wanted to get more into the detail than would be normal, I felt. That said, the relationship was good. There were robust discussions and, at the end of the day, we all knew what was required of us. I think it was a success, but we just met too often.

Q325 Nadhim Zahawi: Let me just push you a little on that. On those robust discussions, as the professional head of the armed forces, were you satisfied that the Prime Minister attached sufficient weight to the views that you expressed at the NSC?

Lord Richards: If the judge of that is the time he gave me, which I think is fair enough, I could not complain. We had lots of discussions both formally during meetings and outside them. Sometimes, I suppose I was not making my arguments very well, or was inarticulate, or whatever. Where the case was strong and I argued it properly, for example when we switched military effort from the east to the west, that decision was agreed very quickly and we got on with it, so I cannot complain.

Q326 Nadhim Zahawi: In answer to my first question, you mentioned about getting more involved than would be normal; that is how you put it in terms of the Prime Minister. How involved was the Prime Minister in the day-to-day operations?

Lord Richards: He was very keen. Sometimes we would meet four times a week. Normally, having commanded at a very high level in Afghanistan, the consensus is that a strategic commander probably has two or three major decisions to make during a six to nine-month campaign, for example. I think he was at that level.

Many of the things that we were doing I felt were beneath his pay grade. For reasons I began to understand, although not fully accept—but largely due to the media, for example—he was appearing to know more than some of his political allies in other countries, such as President Sarkozy, who had a voracious appetite for detail. I sense that the Prime Minister wanted to ensure that he knew everything so he could have a proper debate with them.

Maybe I am wrong and this is the era we now live in, particularly with media and social media and everything else. It just meant that there was a risk that the military chain of command was being pulled around a bit more, rather than being allowed just to get on and deliver on our Prime Minister's intent and being given a bit of time to see the result.

Q327 Nadhim Zahawi: Were you convinced that intervening in Libya was in the UK national interest?

Lord Richards: It is about how you define UK national interests. With the benefit of hindsight—and isn't that wonderful?—

Q328 Nadhim Zahawi: Were you convinced then? You can tell us about hindsight afterwards.

Lord Richards: At the time I felt we did not talk enough about it. We were very clear that we had to do a non-combatant evacuation operation. Almost immediately Benghazi was, it appeared to everybody, and the intelligence supported it, on the point of falling, and Colonel Gaddafi had made some very bloodthirsty threats. You can hang around and have it all perfectly worked out, but military history—and I am a very minor example of it in the past 15 years—is replete with lack of understanding and knowledge.

You can hang around and wait for it, but you have lost the opportunity. Collectively, the NSC decided that, even though we did not know everything that we would want to know in a perfect world—people like me, in particular, were a bit worried about some of the intelligence or lack of it—we had to act. Then you are on a roll and you are in the middle of a

campaign, and you build up that intelligence after the event, and it is not easy, but that is quite common. If you read military history, it happens all the time.

Chair: The question was about the national interest.

Lord Richards: That was an inexperienced attempt to explain why we never finished that conversation. I think the Prime Minister felt it was in our national interest.

Q329 Chair: So what if Gaddafi had recaptured Benghazi? Would we be in a rather better place than we are now?

Lord Richards: Arguably, but we could have been witness to a massacre. Would Britain's reputation in the world be better if we had just sat back and said, "Ah, but it is not in our national interest to intervene"? It is very difficult to judge that, and everyone might have a different view. Softer things such as reputation, natural authority and legitimacy on the world stage, are factors in one's national interest.

If you think about it, until the aftermath, the end, it was not a failure. I said in a book I wrote that tactically, Libya was a success. I was very surprised how quickly, once it was clear that we were going to do this, Gaddafi fell. I was expecting it to take longer, potentially, because we did not have any ground troops.

I do not know if you are aware of the degree to which the Emiratis and the Qataris, for example, played a major role in the success of the ground operation. Without us putting people in there, which we were not going to be allowed to do, that would have been a very hard thing to guarantee. To clear it all up within six months was actually tactically a very impressive result. The problem was what we did at that point. I know you have certain things you have to examine, such as regime change versus protecting civilians, but I have tried to explain that that morphed one into the other in the minds of many people. The real focus is why we were not able to learn the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq and implement the peace efficiently.

Q330 Mr Holloway: I was in Benghazi in the immediate aftermath of that, and I spent time with the Foreign Office and the tiny military team at the hotel. I had the definite impression from them, literally in the week afterwards, that it was going to be a much wider thing—it was about regime change. I remember texting you to tell you about some shiny new gunboats I had seen outside Benghazi, and you were extremely unenthusiastic about it. Maybe that was a bad idea on my part, but the question is: was there a disconnect between the way you were thinking about things and the way the Foreign Office and the Government were thinking about things at the time?

Lord Richards: There was not a disconnect, because we knew each other and we met many times. I was invariably—I suppose inevitably—more cautious about the chances of success. We did not have a locus on the ground. We had the small teams you talk about, but they were not really in a position to guarantee even the most simple tactical outcomes.

Q331 Mr Holloway: No, but the atmosphere and the environment was that this was the big one; we were getting rid of Gaddafi—not even a week after the bombing of those armoured vehicles.

Lord Richards: Just outside Benghazi, which was about April.

Mr Holloway: Yes.

Lord Richards: I would say that by April, although I remember your text on the boats, we were all focused on regime change, so there was not a disconnect.

Q332 Mr Holloway: So if there was one, it was earlier?

Lord Richards: It was earlier, during the NEO. Even during the NEO, we began to hear that some people were beginning to talk about Gaddafi. I was focused on the NEO, and then quite quickly on Benghazi. During Benghazi, an increasingly influential set of people started saying, “If we’re really going to protect civilians, you’ve got to get rid of Gaddafi.” That is when I said, “Well, is that really sensible? What are we going to do if he goes?” and all the things that I had learned through bitter experience. That was rather ignored in the majority view, which was, “We need to get rid of him, simply to make sure we meet the political aim of preventing large-scale civilian loss of life.”

Chair: We will follow up with some machinery of government questions from Adam, before going back to the military campaign.

Q333 Mr Holloway: To what extent did you feel at that time that the *thuwar* were associated with militant Islam?

Lord Richards: I don’t think our knowledge of the various parties in the conflict was as good as one would wish. I remember at one meeting—it could even have been a National Security Council meeting—asking for more explanation of the tribal issues, and some expert said, “They’re not a factor in this campaign.” Essentially, it was seen as a black and white, good and bad issue. I didn’t know much about it, I will be the first to admit that.

We found it quite difficult to get the sort of information you would expect us to get. We developed it during the campaign. That is not new, as you know from your own experience and military history. If we were going to stop Benghazi falling—the decision was taken that we should, and that it would be a stain on our conscience forever if we allowed another Srebrenica; I remember a lot of talk about Srebrenica—it was inevitable that we were not going to have the information we would want in a staff college exercise, unless there were people in some of the agencies who knew about Libya better than they clearly did.

Q334 Mr Holloway: But should we be doing this stuff—Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria—when we have almost no visibility of the ground realities?

Lord Richards: That is a political decision. As long as it is legal. I debated it—

Q335 Chair: Hold on a minute. You were the ISAF commander in Afghanistan, and it now appears that the tribal complexities in Libya, if not quite as complicated as in Afghanistan,

certainly add significant complexity, and you are being told by a so-called expert that they do not play a role at all, at a key part of the decision-making process.

Lord Richards: Yes, but if Benghazi is to be prevented from collapsing, you accept that you do not know as much as you would want in a perfect world. We were rapidly developing that understanding, but I would argue that at the point the decision was taken there was insufficient understanding of the tribal structure. I think there are over 100 tribes. It is very complex, the Libyan tribal structure.

Q336 Chair: So it is just like Afghanistan.

Lord Richards: Yes.

Q337 Andrew Rosindell: Lord Richards, in February 2011, the UK followed France in asking the UN to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. Do you feel that the Libyan intervention was ultimately driven by French leadership?

Lord Richards: I would say they were keener on it, and I did debate with my counterpart some things that would suggest that they might have seen, for example, a French-British operation rather than a NATO operation. So they were a sort of driving force, but I would say they had a nose ahead of us. We were in it together, and that was only in the planning; once we got going—other than on the first day, when they stole a march on us by bombing four hours before we thought they were going to—it was a team effort. President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron were absolutely partners in it, but initially the French were a little bit more enthusiastic.

Q338 Andrew Rosindell: Did you feel that there was an element of Britain wanting to take part because the French were pushing for this, or do you think that it was equal on both sides?

Lord Richards: I think both political leaderships felt that it was a moral issue that we did not allow Benghazi to fall, so I could not really draw much between them. We met, both leaders would talk—essentially, it was both of them together, but I would say the French were a little bit more keen. For example, they were happy to see it be a bi-national or national operation; they did not want NATO in it to begin with. I had to get very steely with one or two people over that, because I did not feel that we had the command and control arrangements and it would be more demanding than perhaps they were thinking, but they soon fell into line, so I don't think it was a big issue.

Q339 Andrew Rosindell: What was the attitude of the United States? Were they unsure? Did they have reservations?

Lord Richards: They had reservations, certainly. At that stage they were building up still in Afghanistan and there was something of a crisis in the Gulf. By the way, I was not that keen on putting too much effort, relatively, in Libya, for the same reason. If you cast your mind back to that time, there were serious suggestions that Israel might unilaterally attack Iran, for example, and we were planning to be ready to help our Gulf Arabs in that eventuality. Given that the SDSR was beginning to hurt us, I was conscious that we might not

have the assets to handle a war in Libya and a potential war in the Gulf, and do what was expected of us in Afghanistan.

Q340 Andrew Rosindell: In your honest opinion, was the intention behind this always humanitarian grounds, or was it really, at the end of the day, about regime change? Was that always the intention?

Lord Richards: As I have tried to say—not very well—the one morphed into the other. Initially, I have no doubt that it was to protect the civilians of Benghazi. It was really a matter then of how you did it. Initially, we had to stop the troops getting into Benghazi, which we did. By the way, I don't think we should put too much emphasis on our effort: the people who fought back Gaddafi were the ones who were being killed. We helped them, and I felt very pleased that we managed to help them; in our subsequent meetings with them, they were clearly grateful. They were the ones doing the fighting; we had just a few liaison officers there at the time, and not very many to begin with. So it was about that.

Despite people like me putting in a break point for some political process to happen, that did not occur. It was clear Gaddafi was not going to pack up. Lots of civilians, not only in Benghazi but places such as Misrata, were under great threat. Were we happy to see Misrata fall? I think it became inevitable that the humanitarian rationale morphed into a change of regime one.

Q341 Mr Baron: May I question you a little on militant Islam? I suppose it leads to the question: how much did we know? You have already given us an indication that it was perhaps not as much as we should have done, with regard to the opposition forces facing Gaddafi. What is particularly interesting is your knowledge, and that of the Security Council, perhaps, of the extent to which anti-Gaddafi rebels were associated with militant Islam. Was anybody aware in Government that Abdelhakim Belhadj and other members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group were actually participating in the rebellion?

Lord Richards: I think it was a grey area. I am not trying to defend us, because I have agreed with you that it was a weakness. What I hope I have tried to get across is that the imperative of the need for speed to prevent Benghazi falling meant that we were committed to conflict in an imperfect world.

I agree with you in many ways that in a perfect world, we would have known it all and said, "Oh, maybe Gaddafi is better from a vital national interest point of view. Perhaps we had better leave Gaddafi there." We could debate that, and there is a debate to be had, there is no doubt about it. We did not know, because we had got on with it.

Q342 Mr Baron: One accepts there are no easy answers in situations like that, just a series of hard decisions. One fully accepts that, but it does seem that there was a complete lack of knowledge about how easily the forces opposing Gaddafi would fracture into 100-plus militias, which would make ruling and any post-conflict planning very difficult, to say the least, and make governance an issue. Do you take on board the view of many that our intervention in Libya empowered extremist groups, particularly ISIL, by removing an important barrier to the growth of militant Islam generally in the region?

Lord Richards: Broadly—the same way that Saddam Hussein’s removal did. I was not dealing with much of the politics, but I did meet some of the Libyan leaders on the margins of other meetings and subsequently.

What I do remember is that there was a quorum of respectable Libyans who were absolutely assuring the Foreign Office and our political leaders that this would not happen, that they had a grasp over these militias and all we needed to do was win and they would all come to heel. Now we know, with the benefit of hindsight, that that was wishful thinking at best.

It is not my part of ship, but even though we were suspicious and beginning to build up understanding during the campaign, for those who were charged with that side of the campaign, you could see why they decided it would somehow work out on the night, even though it certainly did not.

I would also say that the opposite—failure to intervene—in Syria has also led to the same outcome. It is a very difficult one. If historians look back on this, which way do you go? There is only one thing I know: if you are going to do it, do it properly. That is the only certain way of preventing the outcome that we are all now very sorry about.

Q343 Mr Baron: Absolutely. You and I both accept, as do many others, that actually we knew too little about the forces opposing Gaddafi, and that was part of that grey area and so on. With the great benefit of hindsight, having toppled Gaddafi, do you think the west and the UK should have done anything different to try to stop the rise of ISIL subsequently?

Lord Richards: Well, I don’t think it started in Libya. I think you then have to focus on Syria, and yes, I am on record as saying that, back in 2011, we could and arguably should have been much more active on a much larger scale to support the then moderate opposition groups in Syria.

Q344 Mr Baron: If you don’t mind, Lord Richards, I am trying to focus on Libya. I know they are connected, and I accept that we have to look at the rise of ISIL in Syria, which now owns chunks of Libya, as you are well aware, but I am trying to focus you on Libya.

Lord Richards: My answer is that initially there was not a problem with ISIL. I would like to see what we are going to do about Libya now. In five years’ time, if we took the right decisions, we could find that Libya is okay. There is a very democratically elected Parliament in Tobruk with a Government who have offered to help us fight ISIL. This is much more than Britain, of course. It is an international and UN issue. I would like to see how we are hooking into them. They are obviously anti-jihadist and anti-extremist. Surely that is the basis of something. I agree with your thesis—we jolly well need to do more about ISIL. It is the strategic threat confronting us all at the moment.

Chair: Before we get into that, let’s deal with the French.

Q345 Yasmin Qureshi: Lord Richards, I think it is accepted that the French launched their air strikes four hours before the agreed start date of military operations in March 2011. Was the reason for that, as some have suggested, because the French were demonstrating the

stealth capability of their Rafale fighter aircraft to potential foreign buyers, rather than participating in a joined-up air campaign?

Lord Richards: I don't think that was the reason. I put it down to French *élan*, which is a very important part of their military doctrine. They were all ready to go and they just could not resist it. Rather like the discussion Mr Rosindell and I were having a minute ago, they wanted to be seen to be in the van of this. The Arabs would appreciate it. It is sort of what the French do. A bit of me was a bit annoyed, but a bit said, "Why didn't I think of that?" That is tongue-in-cheek, by the way.

So I think that interpretation is a bit cynical. Anyway, it did not work, because our aircraft, over the campaign, proved at least as good—I would argue probably better than theirs, as we often teased each other.

Q346 Chair: Apart from the fact that the Indians and the UAE have bought theirs.

Lord Richards: But we are not doing badly. That is not the purpose of this Committee, is it?

Chair: I was just making an observation about the demonstrable effectiveness.

Lord Richards: All I would say is that I don't think that was the reason. I don't know, but I don't think so.

Q347 Yasmin Qureshi: Basically, you are saying that was not the reason. They were just very excited about getting involved.

Lord Richards: I think so. It's what they do. My counterpart was very apologetic. He is a good friend of mine. It was not a big issue. It was just a bit annoying. If it was the reason—just to ram the nail into the wood—over the next five or six months, all that would come out in the wash. If their aircraft were that much better, it would have come out during the campaign. The fact that they launched an attack on day one, four hours before the rest of us, was not really going to make a big difference at all.

Q348 Chair: Turning to post-civil war, what discussions were there in 2011 about deploying troops following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in order to deliver security on the ground and achieve post-conflict reconstruction and nation building?

Lord Richards: It was discussed, but it quickly became clear to me that that did not have political backing—and for good reason. Other than any political prejudice against it, we were very busy, don't forget. We were at our height in Afghanistan—we did not know then that it was only going to last for another three years—so there was a lot of concern about our ability to sustain what might become quite a large-scale ground operation in Libya. Unless other countries were prepared to do it as well, it was inevitable and had my support that we should not.

Q349 Chair: If it had been done properly, would such a stabilisation force have been effective?

Lord Richards: If it was done on the scale required, which is to freeze the ability of all the parties in Libya to act in a way we did not want them to act, it could have worked, but the last time that was done properly was at the height of the surge in Iraq, and again for a little while in places in Afghanistan. The idea of doing it almost at the same time in Libya was a bit too much.

Q350 Chair: So have successive Libyan Governments ever had a price of stabilising internal security without the deployment of external peacekeeping troops?

Lord Richards: I think it would be very difficult to do so. Obviously, within eastern Libya at the moment, around Tobruk and even into parts of Benghazi and eastwards from Tobruk, there is a lot of stability. They have shown that they can do it themselves. What I would argue now is that we need to get on and help them.

Maybe this is going into today, but the creation, for example, of a third Government based in Tunisia, as well as one in Tripoli and the one in Tobruk is not very helpful, I would argue. In fact, it has puzzled the few people I know in Tobruk, who are saying, “You’ve just made life even more difficult for us because there is a third centre of power.” This is still going on. By the way, this is not British; this is a UN creation. It is very difficult for Libyans themselves.

Q351 Chair: I recall that at the end of the civil war, a key element of our policy being promoted was that we were going to secure the Libyan army’s stock of weapons once Gaddafi had gone. What did we do to try to achieve that?

Lord Richards: You are testing my memory a bit here. We had plans ready to do it. I don’t think we ended up—I am not certain, I’m afraid.

Q352 Chair: We certainly did not achieve it.

Lord Richards: We did not achieve it. I have an idea we did deploy one small group to ensure a particular type of weapon was—or the Americans did. I don’t know how you find these things. Presumably it is known. I cannot remember it.

Q353 Chair: I can remember it being a target and policy objective.

Lord Richards: It certainly was.

Q354 Chair: But you can’t remember us doing anything to achieve it.

Lord Richards: No. That probably says it all.

Q355 Mr Holloway: I think it is staggering that western countries do these things and imagine that we can control every lever after we have done them. On that, as the Chief of the Defence Staff at the time, to what extent were you involved in the post-conflict planning for reconstruction?

Lord Richards: Very little. It was essentially a FCO/DFID lead. We had some officers in the stabilisation unit. It was clear that we were not going to get involved militarily in a stabilisation or peacekeeping role, so I got on with other things.

Q356 Mr Holloway: Do you think that expressions such as “stabilisation unit” are rather Whitehall wishful thinking terms? We unleash chaos in Libya and then we have something called the stabilisation unit, which I suppose the public imagine can suddenly sort everything out. Is that wishful thinking?

Lord Richards: You have to have something that is responsible for drawing up the plans. The plans were not bad; I thought they were too sophisticated.

Q357 Mr Holloway: Could we ever?

Lord Richards: No, without a decision. The most important part of any stabilisation is first of all the security. If you cannot get security, you cannot stabilise. Unless security was coming through a UN-mandated peacekeeping force—it was not going to come from us—I agree with you that that was the first requirement not met.

Q358 Mr Holloway: So how successful was the “stabilisation unit”?

Lord Richards: Well, you can see for yourself that it was not successful. They drew up some very good plans, but they could not implement the plans. To be fair, there was no one to plug into, whatever those Libyan politicians had said early on. This became clear over a period of three to four months. Initially, you will remember the Prime Minister, I think the Foreign Secretary and certainly Liam Fox did go there and it was all fine and hunky dory and they were talking to people who claimed to be the Government, but over the next three months it just began to fracture.

Q359 Chair: Was this expert who told you there was no tribal structure in Libya on the stabilisation unit? Or did he or she come from somewhere else?

Lord Richards: No, I think he came from somewhere else.

Q360 Chair: Where?

Lord Richards: Somewhere on the inside, I would say. One of those experts one has at meetings and does not quite know who owns them.

Q361 Chair: But the advice was so confidently delivered that you, having been commander in Afghanistan for three years, were able to go, “That’s probably okay. Nothing sounds up with that.”

Lord Richards: No, I said, “I don’t agree with you. We need to know more.” But the decision to do what we did in Benghazi was taken almost on the same day and we got on with doing that.

Q362 Mr Holloway: Has a pattern emerged where we use these mighty tools we have in these countries to unleash forces that we did not even know were there; then we have these comprehensive approaches—all of this stuff—and stabilisation units that do not have the

resources to do what needs to be done and, anyway, they were never going to because they are external forces that are completely inadequate and have no idea of the realities on the ground? Haven't we deluded ourselves for a decade or more?

Lord Richards: The stabilisation unit is not the people or the organisation that implements the stabilisation. I would not be too harsh on them. They have built up an understanding of what is required. The problem is implementing the plans. They do not do the implementation—

Q363 Mr Holloway: Precisely—the whole thing is a fantasy, really.

Lord Richards: If the Government or Governments—we are talking about an allied operation—are not prepared to go for a Marshall plan scale of generosity and resources, then much of it comes to nothing. You are right: it is theory. But rather like the Chair was suggesting a minute ago, if you do it properly, it can work.

Q364 Mr Holloway: Where have we done it properly?

Lord Richards: For a while we got it pretty good in Iraq—towards the end—and for a while we didn't do too badly in Afghanistan, but at the very moment we were gaining the momentum there, it was time to start pulling out.

Q365 Mr Holloway: In your experience of having been very much at the top throughout all of these things, do you think the lesson from all of this is that it is perhaps unwise to deploy military forces that unleash forces that we cannot control, and we cannot do anything about it afterwards? Isn't it wishful thinking to a degree?

Lord Richards: I agree. The thrust of much what you are all saying is what we and you know as a proper campaign, and at the end of the campaign, or towards the end of the campaign, is the political stabilisation phase, as we might call it now. Unless you are committed to that phase as well, you should not start the first thing.

That is in a perfect world. If you want to stop Benghazi falling because you are worried about 100,000 people being killed, you probably have not got the luxury of working it all out to the point where you are succeeding in nine or 12 months' time. That was the problem. It was forced on us because there was a real risk to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Q366 Chair: But if that is your policy objective, it might be an idea to confine your policy objective to your objective rather than widening it.

Lord Richards: I agree, and that must be one of the big debates that we should be having. To a degree, I think the fact that we have not done the same thing in Syria suggests that there is understanding of that, ill-formed as it might be.

Q367 Mr Hendrick: Libya is close to being a failed state now—

Mr Holloway: It is.

Mr Hendrick: Well, I was being euphemistic. Large parts of its territory are controlled by ISIL. In your book, “Taking Command,” you stated that “Libya has been a qualified success”. Where is the success?

Lord Richards: The Libyan campaign was a qualified success tactically. I think I said earlier that to bring down a regime—despite that not being our initial aim, which was humanitarian—all within five months or so, actually was a tactical success. We achieved our aims.

I am entirely in agreement with you that strategically—this is why I said it was a qualified success—it has not yet lived up to all our hopes and expectations. It is a strategic failure, or at least it is a strategic phase that we are in. What I would like to see now is us ask what are we going to do about it today, rather than just all going over it. That really should be our issue.

Q368 Mr Hendrick: The inquiry is looking at what lessons we can learn from it, so that we do not make similar mistakes in the future.

Lord Richards: That is really important.

Q369 Mr Hendrick: So would you say that it was a military success but that, in every other aspect, it was a failure?

Lord Richards: Tactically, as we would call it, it was a success. But it needn’t be a strategic failure when looked back on in 10, 15 years’ time if we do the right thing today by the people of Libya. I think that is what I would focus on—not necessarily you; but maybe if we get it right then Libya needn’t be strategically the failure we fear it might be becoming.

Q370 Mr Hendrick: Last week, in the Liaison Committee, the Prime Minister said “the Libyan people were given an opportunity” and “that opportunity was not taken.” Do you think that is a fair comment?

Lord Richards: I can see why he said that, but I think that we should now be helping them to take that opportunity a second or a third time, whatever it is. In the sense that they couldn’t agree—despite being told they would agree, they didn’t—and they splintered into all these different groups, in that respect I see what the Prime Minister is saying, but we must keep trying because it is a very important country. The people—I keep going back to the millions whose lives have been spoiled, rather like in Syria—they are rather forgotten. There is big politics that the leaders are focused on. I do think there is a moral obligation on us all to have another go. I would like to see that happen.

Q371 Mr Hendrick: Given your experience in Afghanistan, and, obviously, what happened in Iraq, do you think that it was the easy option—just doing an air campaign and not having our own boots on the ground either during the conflict or, as some people have suggested, at the very least to have proper stabilisation and not just a so-called stabilisation unit?

Lord Richards: In a perfect world that is what you do. You do what we did. Gaddafi is, sadly, in one respect—he was killed: regime change. In we would have gone, en masse—

because you have to have numbers. You can't do this, as we learned to our cost—as if we didn't tell people, by the way—in places like Helmand. You need to have sufficient troops to freeze the ability of all those different players from having the freedom to disrupt what you are trying to do. So you are talking tens of thousands of troops, if you are going to do it properly—it doesn't have to be British, but all together. If you do that I think the doctrine—the stabilisation doctrine—can be made to work, but if you don't do it properly or you haven't got the resources to do it, then arguably you shouldn't do it at all.

Q372 Mr Hendrick: Is the lesson from that, then, that we didn't have a hope? Because if we can't nation-build in Afghanistan and Iraq with tens of thousands of troops on the ground, how can we hope to nation-build in Libya with none of our troops on the ground and relying on disorganised sets of militias? Does that not follow through to Syria, in the sense that there are myriad different forces on the ground, none of which we could control, and therefore our air strikes and those of the allies might not lead to any stable situation at any time in the future?

Lord Richards: I agree with you. You need—I used to say “Mass matters”, mass being numbers. There is a sort of cosy belief that mass doesn't matter; it is all about technology, but if you want to win wars as opposed to battles, mass still matters. That means boots on the ground.

Q373 Yasmin Qureshi: Really my question is that in your discussion with the Prime Minister about this particular misadventure, as I call it, did you sense that, like President Sarkozy, who was very anxious to get into this war, our Prime Minister was just as anxious to get into this war? Somehow over the last 30 years, there is a precedent developing that all Prime Ministers now want to have a war of some sort, whether it is a Belgrano, whether it is Afghanistan, or whether it is Iraq, Libya and others.

Lord Richards: Well, I think people know the Prime Minister and I have had, on occasions, robust discussions about various things, so I don't have to say anything I don't believe. I watched a man who was taking a very serious decision very seriously. There is no way that I would tell you that he was excited about the prospect. There was a sober realisation that if we didn't do what we did with our air power for the people of Benghazi, there was a major risk that hundreds of thousands—or tens of thousands—of people's lives would be lost; so I can't agree with you.

Yasmin Qureshi: We have heard evidence to that effect, but that is not the case.

Chair: I am sorry, Yasmin; we are out of time.

Q374 Mr Baron: Do you not think, then, Lord Richards, one of the key lessons from this is the old military adage that you define your objective—in this case relieving the citizens of Benghazi—and you stick to it?

Lord Richards: There is a lot to be said for that, which is why we built in that point after Benghazi for a political process to kick in. What we had not realised is that we did not own the process. There was a momentum by then and, although it was great in theory, in practice it proved impossible to do. Although we discussed it, it just didn't happen, but I am sure there is much in what you have just said.

Q375 Chair: Lord Richards, thank you very much indeed for your evidence. I am assuming that the discussion about the tribal nature of what we weren't facing was at one of those endless National Security Council meetings.

Lord Richards: I am not certain it was at the National Security Council—it could have been. We had about three levels of the National Security Council. One was officials and, to be fair, I think it could have been at the officials' one. I can't remember because we had so many of them.

Q376 Chair: Lord Richards, thank you very much indeed for your evidence. It is much appreciated.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan**, gave evidence.

Q377 Chair: As a DFID Minister in the immediate post-conflict period, what were your responsibilities in relation to stabilisation and reconstruction?

Sir Alan Duncan: I was not directly responsible for stabilisation. Because it was such a burning issue, the actual stabilisation responsibilities rested higher up the chain, I did, however, see what was being prepared and I expressed my opinions quite clearly. My view was that the stabilisation plans were unrealistic. As Lord Richards has just said, it basically means nothing unless you have security. The document we were shown was basically the International Stabilisation Response Team, and when it came to me I recall writing on the "Advice to Ministers", "fanciful rot." The reason was that I thought it was an unrealistic desktop exercise. It was very theoretical. In a perfect world, yes, let's have water, sanitation, schools, political dialogue and so on, but in the absence of a proper political settlement and indeed a settled state, there was no forum in which stabilisation could take place. It would properly be described as a normalisation plan on the back of something that needed to be already stable. That is why I think it didn't work.

Q378 Chair: I was going to ask you whether the plans were realistic and informed, but obviously they weren't.

Sir Alan Duncan: The whole document speaks in terms of tidy certainties, and those certainties simply did not exist. The theoretical nature of this was very self-deluding.

Q379 Chair: What is your analysis of how the system could produce a document like that in 2011, eight years after having begun military adventures on a serious scale in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Sir Alan Duncan: To be fair to the process, Libya was seen differently. I think there was an assumption—clearly now proved to be wrong but at the time it did not feel unreasonable to many—that once a nasty dictator who had been there for 40 years was removed, there would be a benign background, a natural movement towards a more liberal society, and people would be set free so they would all love one another and want to govern the country.

My view when I saw the document was, “Tribes?” That has already been mentioned during your witness session with Lord Richards. There was no attempt whatever to analyse the political complexion of the country, much of which had been smothered over 40 years by the dictatorial control of Muammar Gaddafi. That was a necessary exercise, which was not done.

Q380 Mr Baron: We talked with Lord Richards about the importance of security and the normalisation/stabilisation point. Does that document in itself not illustrate a complete lack of understanding of the forces on the ground, not just within DFID but across Whitehall?

Sir Alan Duncan: I sense that is a conclusion you will reach. It was obviously not my remit at the time—

Q381 Mr Baron: No, I am asking you the question. Is that your take on it? What is your assessment, then? How could a system produce a document like that when it was so blatantly removed from the truth? Was it simply lack of knowledge? Was it that we did not understand what was happening on the ground? Or was it just wilful neglect?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, I think they did not know what was happening on the ground. I think there was just this whopping assumption that anything that followed Gaddafi could only be better and would lead very quickly to some kind of more liberal regime, which would want to govern itself better than Gaddafi.

What it did not foresee was that there were real historic and tribal tensions underneath within the country, which, once the firm grip of Gaddafi were let go, would be unleashed as a force for conflict rather than unity. This is a big historical lesson. I think that many people looked at Libya as something that was very different from Afghanistan or other countries. This was an oppressed country which, with the first breath of freedom, would somehow be better.

Q382 Mr Baron: Yes, but you could argue that there had been lessons previously. When Saddam Hussein was removed, there were tensions there. I accept that it perhaps was not on the scale of Libya. But you knew Libya well, and there were other people who knew Libya well. There was commentary at the time, including from within Parliament, and some of us who opposed the Libyan intervention made the point at the time that actually there were hundreds of militias in this country, and to believe that they would stay united once Gaddafi had gone was extremely optimistic. Yet Whitehall is producing this document saying that all is going to be sunshine and light.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not sure that I did know Libya as well as you suggest. I knew it from a commercial point of view, from having bought oil from the country in the 1980s. Certainly, I think that in the Arab world, everything is more complicated than one would wish.

Q383 Mr Holloway: Did the NTC try to do anything in terms of reconstruction, or was all their effort military and political—or could they just not do anything?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think the NSC, which was only really six months into its life—

Mr Holloway: No, sorry; the NTC.

Sir Alan Duncan: The NTC; I beg your pardon. I don't know. I think there was an assumption, and it is sort of in the stabilisation response report, that the NTC's remit would wind up once Gaddafi went, and that somehow a new political structure would emerge. The NTC, as I recall—this is not necessarily my expertise as a DFID Minister—was not assumed to be the organisation that would take over the country as a Government.

Q384 Mr Holloway: Who, in this fantasy world, was going to provide services to the population? Was anyone?

Sir Alan Duncan: It needs a Government, but potentially they can provide their own services, because they have got fantastic resource. This is a country which, when it is running at full production, can export 1.6 million barrels of oil a day. It is currently running, probably, at a couple of hundred.

In terms of the then oil price and the potential for production, it was a country which was in a very good position to pay its own way and really have a very strong economic future. The great vision was that 10 years afterwards, it could be the great tourist attraction of the Mediterranean—not quite at the moment. In terms of resources, if you had the economic security of oil exports, it could have been in a very strong position.

Q385 Mr Holloway: Did the UN have any role at this time on the ground?

Sir Alan Duncan: In terms of stabilisation?

Mr Holloway: Yes, exactly.

Sir Alan Duncan: Not that I recall, as such, no. There were really no people operating on the ground during the conflict, and I do not think that that vacuum was filled, as I recall, by UN resources.

Q386 Nadhim Zahawi: Was it just that we did not have the analytical firepower? What is your take? Where is the disconnect here? We know Libya well.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, do we? You see, I am not sure we did.

Q387 Nadhim Zahawi: The Foreign Office has had a history of knowing the Middle East well. What have we lost that allowed this document to come before you that you can be so upset about it?

Sir Alan Duncan: In terms of Libya, our expertise had become very thin. If you go back 40 or 50 years ago, you will find a lot of Army personnel and defence people with a very good knowledge of the country and indeed, its tensions, tribes and regions. That had gradually, of course, disappeared over the passage of time. We had had the political initiative to try and—indeed, it was successful—persuade Gaddafi to part with his weapons of mass destruction. I actually think that was a proper and correct diplomatic exercise, but then—just when that was being banked, if you like—in came what we call the Arab spring and everything got thrown into turmoil. Inasmuch as they were dealing as experts with the regime and trying to achieve this prize of denuclearisation, I think they were doing absolutely the

right thing. I find no fault with that, but the trouble is that the relations at that level all were turned on their head, and I suspect that we did not really have much resource in any way focused on the ground on the deeper, complicated complexion of Libya as a country without Gaddafi.

Q388 Chair: It seems extremely odd, in an information age when there is usually a plethora of information, that this lack of analytical capability that Mr Zahawi is referring to should exist in this day and age. What reflection is that on our system and on the capacity of the Foreign Office?

Sir Alan Duncan: These are my personal views—

Q389 Chair: I am inviting your reflection as someone who has kicked around in way or another in international affairs for quite a long time.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, from having knocked around the Middle East a bit. I think we have lost having enough people on the ground in an embassy. For instance, we are employing more and more local staff, so you do not have that cadre of lower-level people who have been in various countries who work their way up and through the Foreign Office, who give that rich experience of a country in which they have worked. I think that we are now spread very thinly in terms of expertise and country knowledge.

One of the things that worries me about both DFID and the Foreign Office is the constant churn of personnel. No sooner do you understand something than you are moved to another job, so you have a couple of years doing something, and then around you go to somewhere else and you get someone completely new in who hasn't done anything. I would say that some of the desk officers now in the Foreign Office have insufficient experience of the country that they are responsible for. So I think there is a real problem of resources and deployment, which is spreading us very thinly. That would be my personal observation.

Q390 Chair: Can I move you on to the United Nations and how effective you think it was in co-ordinating post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I say, I was not directly responsible. I do not recall that there was anything very much that happened, but it may be that I am not the right person to give you proper chapter and verse on that. But I do not recall anything of any particular significance that happened afterwards.

Q391 Chair: The UK approach to post-conflict reconstruction was predicated on mobilising Libya's financial assets to pay for reconstruction. Was that approach effective?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I kept some notes on the bottom of my appointments diary as this issue unfolded. I can find it here somewhere, but as I recall, one of the things that happened quite rapidly was that a lot of frozen assets were released. Quite whether they were deployed and how, I don't know, but I recall, for instance, going to Tripoli and a lot of these buildings were half-built. What you had was a whole array of commercial disputes about who then owned the building. Therefore, when you had the frozen contracts, however much money was released was not actually going to get the cranes swinging and the concrete

mixers churning, because you had this legal lock. There were quite a lot of British lawyers trying to release these frozen contracts, so it was not just the money, but all the aftermath of who owned what that was causing a lot of difficulty in terms of economic regeneration.

Q392 Chair: Could we go on to the particular role you played in this around the Libyan oil cell? You led a Libyan oil cell in Whitehall, drawing on your previous commercial experience. Can you confirm that that was authorised by the Prime Minister, and can you tell us what the objective of that oil cell was?

Sir Alan Duncan: What happened was that in the course of February and in particular through March 2011, it became clear from the oil industry sources I knew that sanctions were having a perverse effect. What happened was that AGOCO—the Arabian Gulf Oil Company, which was the state oil company and the vehicle through which crude oil was exported—had been sanctioned. That was the only vehicle through which the Benghazi end, which had most of the oil, could possibly market their oil into international markets and hence get money and refined products in. Legally it was the only entity that any trading company or insurance company could accept without having legal recourse.

What the sanctions had done was freeze oil for the good guys while Gaddafi could keep selling it. He had tons of money abroad, which was somehow allowing him to buy refined products. He had his own Zawiya refinery, which was fed by the El Sharara field through a pipeline over the Nafusa hills. He had all the oil he wanted, which gave him money and movement. The Benghazi end, perversely, was being completely cut off. I went to the Prime Minister and said, “You are going to lose this. If you don’t win the oil war, you are going to lose the Libyan war.” To his enormous credit, he took that on board and referred it to the NSC. He launched an initiative and basically said, “All right mate, you go and sort it.” Without his initiative, which was specifically a British initiative, that would not have happened.

We had a little oil cell with the agencies, the Foreign Office and Defence Intelligence to work out who the goodies were and who the baddies were, and we identified a number of things that we had to do. We had to stop the trucks coming in from Tunisia that were supplying refined products to the Gaddafi end. We had to disable or diminish the Zawiya refinery, which essentially was Gaddafi’s little kettle in his heartland and gave him all the refined products he wanted. We had to stop traders breaking sanctions and supplying ships into the Tripoli end of Libya, and somehow we had to encourage people to supply the Benghazi end or buy their crude oil so that they could keep going. There was a period—I put this to the Prime Minister, and people could see it—where it looked as though Gaddafi was about to get the upper hand. In terms of restricting the oil, NATO basically stuck frigates straight across the bows of delivering ships and said, “You turn around, mate.” In Tunisia—

Q393 Chair: That was as a result of your work.

Sir Alan Duncan: Not just me, but once the penny dropped, the system got into action. All credit to Defence Intelligence, the people in NATO and the proper co-ordination with the French. As I recall, the French blocked the pipeline coming down to the Zawiya refinery. It was good *Boys’ Own* stuff. They did not blow it up; they got the concrete mixer out and completely encased the valve in the “off” position, which meant no oil into the

Zawiya refinery. It was very simple and very good, because you can then restore it later. You have not killed the infrastructure.

The other thing we had to do was make sanctions work. Your Committee in a broader sense may be interested more generally in the working of sanctions. They very rarely fail to have a perverse consequence, and the perverse consequence in this case was that by sanctioning AGOCO, they completely put their hands around the throats of the goodies so that they could not sell their crude oil. You had to find a mechanism for releasing the AGOCO from being sanctioned, which I think happened. Again, Hillary Clinton was very helpful in doing that.

The other thing that we tried to do, which was not a great success—I think it was the initiative of the UN—was to set up what was called a temporary finance mechanism. That was designed to be a pot of money that could help pay for refined products to go into the Benghazi end in the event, as was the case over time, they were unable to get through the AGOCO problem and export crude oil. Of course the production of crude oil was also diminishing.

All of these things—keeping Benghazi able to export crude oil and buy refined products; stopping smugglers getting products into the Gaddafi end and crude oil out; stopping stuff coming in from Tunisia; and stopping the refinery getting its feedstock from the Sahara oilfield—came together in quite an effective way, although it was quite complicated through the months of April and June.

Q394 Chair: How successful was it and how important was it? Did it get overtaken by events in the end?

Sir Alan Duncan: Of course the no-fly zone was very important. There was a moment when the Prime Minister called for a no-fly zone and was absolutely ridiculed. Two weeks later, he was the guy who banked it. He went from zero to hero on that issue. Again, he was right—two initiatives of the Prime Minister that made a crucial difference in Libya.

I do not want to over-egg the oil significance. You never win a war unless you have control of oil and energy. It is ammo of a sort. In this case, it was a crucial ingredient and it did work, as the Prime Minister said in the House. It was part of the lessons learnt exercise, which we might come to later, but it was part, of course, of a bigger picture—political cohesion, the no-fly zone, what the Emiratis and the Qataris were doing on the ground and, of course, the fighting of the Benghazi militia themselves. All I would say is that if we had not done it, it would seriously have given Gaddafi the upper hand once again and, at the very least, would have prolonged, perhaps by a year, what happened. In this case, we did manage to strangle his resources and keep the Benghazi end going, largely because the private sector took a risk and was able to take financial exposure—out of duty, really—to do it.

Q395 Chair: I sense that the Whitehall regime would have regarded a politically appointed oil trader to run an operation in the circumstances we have today with an element of horror. How did the bureaucracy react to the setting up of the cell? Were they imaginative and co-operative or difficult and obstructive? Were there different departments in different places? Perhaps you could describe your bureaucratic battle—if there was one—to make this work.

Sir Alan Duncan: It was quite a struggle. There were some very unhappy moments for me personally. I was accused of things so it was awkward. By and large, thanks to the new apparatus of the National Security Council and the clear instruction of the Prime Minister, it worked well. Peter Ricketts, the other people at the NSC, Defence Intelligence and people like that came together extremely well.

After the event, I wrote a recollection of this for the NSC to consider. It is absolutely clear that in a moment of national crisis or national need like this, when an initiative of this sort is happening, it does not sit comfortably when it does not fit tidily into departmental silos. Although the very best was brought out in some people, the very worst was brought out in others, who were unhappy with such an initiative. We managed to get over that. We had to be cool and patient, but we managed.

Q396 Mr Holloway: Are you saying that the same sort of people who did not acknowledge that there were tribes in Libya could not accept that an expert should be in charge of something that they knew about?

Sir Alan Duncan: I would not put it as bluntly as that, and it is not necessarily the same people. In our politics, we live increasingly in an age of rules, rather than decision. As a colleague once said to me, “The trouble with this lark is that compliance is king, and initiative is dead.” There were some people who did exactly that and said, “Surely, it is not right that a Minister in DFID is doing something on oil.” Some questions flew around. We overcame all that, but there were some difficult moments.

Mr Holloway: Staggering.

Q397 Chair: Presumably there is an issue here, in that you would have to be operating with private companies who were presumably doing this to make a profit.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, but we were absolutely meticulous in reporting lines, declaration, transparency, and there was never a meeting with anybody without a private secretary. All of those proprieties were absolutely laid down from the start. I insisted on them anyway to protect my own neck. For instance, there was no acting on behalf of any private company by Government. Indeed, in a way, unlike the Americans, I think we tend to be over-separate from the private sector in these moments of need, but the private sector did deliver, did take a risk. Yes, they make money; they are not going to do anything for a loss, but it is not to say that they did not in the meantime face enormous risk, because if the story had unfolded differently in Libya, there is half a billion dollars they might never have been paid.

Q398 Chair: What has happened, as far as you are aware, to the lessons learned analysis that you wrote?

Sir Alan Duncan: My thoughts were a contribution to a wider, cross-Whitehall lessons learned exercise, which the Prime Minister announced in the House, and which was overseen, as I recall, by the NSC. It looked into a number of things, such as how central co-ordination mechanisms worked, the effectiveness of the NSC, discussions about policy and clarity of decisions—all that kind of stuff that one might expect. I haven’t seen the outcome and I don’t know where it rests, but the Prime Minister announced in the Chamber that this is what would be done, and I know that it has been done, exactly as he said it would be.

Q399 Mr Baron: The list that you read out is not all-inclusive, and one accepts that, but coming back to an earlier point that many of us believe and which you touched upon, what acceptance has there been of the fact that what Libya illustrates perhaps almost best is that there is a lack of understanding of the forces at play on the ground? That could be a for a variety of reasons, and one of the central ones, which has been a long-standing point for the Committee, is a lack of investment in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, because we simply do not have the experts on the ground. You alluded to that yourself. Post Libya, and that learning exercise, has there been a greater recognition of that, or was that analysis simply a systematic one—of systems rather than of acquiring expertise on the ground?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am a strong believer in a well-resourced Foreign Office, with strong language skills, a lot of in-country experience and deep analytical understanding of countries at their most complicated. I think in the case of Libya it was very much a sudden new world because of the Arab Spring, and the difficulties in the country to which we had not given sufficient significance in the past in terms of its internal politics. Has there been recognition? Yes. I would like to think that the Chancellor has underpinned the resources of the Foreign Office in the last expenditure round. We have the Gulf strategy, which is determined to re-engage in greater depth on many layers in the Arabian Gulf with GCC countries and nearby, and that is good. Do I think that the Foreign Office could benefit from more resource and, if you like, the greater development of individuals within it? Yes, I think so. Anyone who thinks that a well-resourced Foreign Office is a luxury really needs to be made to think again.

Q400 Mr Baron: You make the point that the Arab Spring was perhaps the main reason why things got into a state of flux. Surely the central point is the fact that we had an almost complete lack of understanding of forces on the ground and of the fact that forces opposing Gaddafi would splinter as much as they did, which was a key factor why post-conflict planning and reconstruction did not make much progress. That is the central point here: we simply did not know the forces at play on the ground, perhaps through a lack of investment over many decades.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes; the Foreign Office, with limited resources, has to decide where it places those resources and which countries have top priority. Tripoli—Libya, rather—was in a very unusual box from that point of view. I would like to think that I know a little bit about the Middle East, but did I see what was coming quite to this extent? Most certainly not, and I wonder really who did.

Q401 Mr Baron: There were commentators at the time who said, “Be careful what you wish for.” May I move on briefly? This question falls outside the terms of the inquiry but relates to the Committee’s wider work. Given your experience in the oil industry and with the Libyan oil cell, do you have an insight as to how ISIL exports crude oil from the fields it controls in Iraq and Syria? How is it that ISIL seems to be so successful at doing that?

Sir Alan Duncan: Funnily enough, if you had given me notice of this, I could have given you quite a good answer—perhaps better than I can today, but I can always write to you.

Chair: Please do.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will try. I think what is happening is that you are looking at relatively small volumes, mostly crude oil from a producing field, being trucked, probably quite a lot of it into Turkey and some into Syria—I am speculating here. The thing about crude oil is that it's no good on its own and it's no good in small volumes. You need a tankful of a particular crude oil to be able to stick it into a refinery and turn it into refined products, and it is only the refined products—be it gasoil, motor gasoline or fuel oil—that, in themselves, become a useful resource.

Also, if you are trucking little volumes that gradually build up into a workable volume, you are not going to get the market value that you would if it were half a million barrels in a tanker. I suspect that the volumes and the utility of those volumes are less than people think, and I suspect the actual cash is a bit less than people think. However, the fact that any at all is getting into, let's say, Turkey, is a scandal, in my view. In the same way we were stopping trucks going from Tunisia into Libya, there should surely be a way of stopping tanker loads going from ISIL-controlled areas into Turkey.

Q402 Mr Baron: We have a minute or two, but I will ask you to follow up that kind offer. We will be pursuing this as a sub-Committee later on. Very briefly, how would you now, if you were in charge, disrupt that oil flow and therefore profitable business for ISIL?

Sir Alan Duncan: You've got to know where it is coming from. You need to physically interdict the shipments, which is going to be far more effective than any kind of financial sanctions or smartly targeted money things. This cry of, "Somehow get in there and stop ISIL's money," as if you can freeze a bank account is not how this is going to work. You have to cut off the money-making practices and the money-making exercises.

I don't think, for instance, there is a pipeline doing this. If there is a pipeline, let's say, going straight from an ISIL-controlled field into a Syrian refinery, that would be bigger volumes, much more marketable and so on, but you also know where the pipeline is and could do something about it. You have to identify exactly where the physical routes are—where they are coming from, where they are going to and by what means. Then you can work out the best means of interdicting them or smashing them up or something.

Q403 Chair: Should we be running a similar oil cell for ISIL to the one you ran for Libya, or does the parallel not hold?

Sir Alan Duncan: I don't think the parallel holds that closely. The objective is the same: if they are making money out of illicit oil supplies, stop the supply. In terms of the actual situation of bulk cargoes going into a main port and all that kind of stuff, the parallels then collapse, but there are some parallels.

Q404 Yasmin Qureshi: Sir Alan, we heard quite a lot about, and there has been debate about, how much the Foreign Office now knows or how much people seem to know about Libya or other conflicts. Talking specifically about Libya, Lord Richards, Lord Hague and everyone have said, "Well, we didn't have this information and we didn't have that information, and we weren't sure who the opposition were," and so on. Everybody seemed to suggest that somehow, there was no way of finding that information out. There must have been people, surely, in this country as well as in Libya and the surrounding Middle East, and organisations—groups of people—whose knowledge could have been tapped into on who,

when we go into an intervention like Libya, we are ultimately going to end up helping. Do you understand why that wide consultation was never done by anybody?

Sir Alan Duncan: It may have been to some extent, and in terms of who is leading what faction I think there will have been intelligence sources that we had. Going across the Middle East, I have never come across a country where there are not great experts who say, “Ah, I know all about this.” A lot of them are out of date and a bit fossilised in their knowledge. On the other hand, you need to be able to ask everybody and use your judgment to weed out what you think is true.

I think Libya would have been a very difficult one, but the sources would not have been within the English-speaking world. You need really good Arab sources, probably—Egyptians, for instance, and some others from the north of Africa. Would we have the ability to find them and draw on them? It is quite an exercise, but it is always an idea to try.

Q405 Yasmin Qureshi: I mean, if you are going to be spending hundreds of millions of pounds on bombing places, it is worth exploring further who we have. I hope you will forgive me if I say this, Chairman, but when the Libya debate happened in Parliament, a number of Members of Parliament across the House made speeches. I said in my speech—

Chair: It is on the record.

Yasmin Qureshi: It is on the record. I actually said virtually everything that everybody has now told us we became aware of afterwards, for example about the rebels who are fighting, who was going to end up there, and the religious nutcases. If I knew that, why couldn’t the might of the state—the Foreign Office and the defence industry—work it out?

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps I can come back at you with this point, if you don’t mind. This was not a classic invasion where we suddenly decided to go and commit troops, and bomb and everything. This was actually a response to massive humanitarian need.

Let me read out, if I may, a note that I put at the bottom of my appointments diary on Sunday 24 April: “DFID helping evacuation from Misrata. Besieged by Gaddafi. Tales of mass rape and Gaddafi giving mercenaries Viagra.” That was actually why we did it. If I were asked to do it again on the same basis, would I? Yes. That was the compelling reason for us having a no-fly zone, taking a view and saying that this could not be allowed to go ahead. It was that compelling moral, humanitarian driver that made us do what we did, and I think we were right to do it.

Q406 Mr Hendrick: We can all reflect on the early part of this decade, when the words “Arab Spring” were very fashionable—nobody seems to talk about them much nowadays. We had the view that we could free a lot of people in north Africa and the Middle East by helping them along a path to the sort of democratic society that we enjoy. It has all gone wrong for one reason or another. How do you view the past, and what do you think we can learn from that?

Sir Alan Duncan: If I might say so, Mr Hendrick, your question rather implies that we created the Arab Spring—

Mr Hendrick: No, we tried to facilitate the forces that were opposing dictatorships.

Sir Alan Duncan: We did. We took a view when that was happening, you are quite right. There has been a negotiated GCC-led transition in Yemen, for instance, although that has since gone rather sour because of the Houthis trying to take over the whole country and displace a legitimate Government. In Egypt, I think we were too quick to say, “Mubarak’s gone, therefore there will be the blossoming of liberal democracy in Egypt.” I have just been there this weekend, and actually I think that stability and order in Egypt is better than what would have happened had Mohamed Morsi stayed there.

Stability, to me, is the watchword and objective of everything we need to see in this region at the moment, because if you lose stability and order, these countries collapse into just the kind of disorder that you have been criticising. That introduces other moral and political issues about whether you support regimes that are not thought to be democratic or particularly liberal, but none the less are the only ones that can give stability and order. My personal view is that we have to preserve stability and order wherever we can at the moment, because we are in a world of great turmoil and danger. If other regimes collapse, it is very difficult to see how problems will not just grow and grow and grow.

Q407 Mr Hendrick: Have we given up on nation-building?

Sir Alan Duncan: No! We never give up. DFID has had some great successes working with international partners in Africa. There was a question about whether stabilisation has ever worked. I am not an Africa hand, but I think there have been some very good advances in Sudan, and in Yemen we held things together pretty well, with the other international actors, until the civil war broke out because of the Houthi takeover. So there have been successes—they are never absolute, they are perhaps only marginal, but none the less, a lot of the effort that DFID makes in development in this field is a force for good.

Chair: We are just about to divide in the House, so I am going to call time. Sir Alan, thank you very much indeed for your evidence. It is very much appreciated. We look forward to any extra details you can give us on oil out of ISIL and the rest.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will do some digging. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much.