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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Oral evidence: Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options, HC 520

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Watch the meeting

Members present:

Crispin Blunt (Chair); Mr John Baron; Stephen Gethins; Daniel Kawczynski; Yasmin Qureshi

Questions 408-448

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Malcolm Chalmers**, Deputy Director-General, Royal United Services Institute, **Professor Patrick Porter**, Professor of Strategic Studies, University of Exeter, and **Chris Stephen**, Libya Correspondent, *The Guardian*, gave evidence.

Q408 Chair: Welcome to this morning's sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The session is part of our inquiry into Libya—our examination of the intervention and collapse of Libya, and Britain's future policy options. Gentlemen, will you please identify yourselves for the record?

   Malcolm Chalmers: I'm Malcolm Chalmers.

Q409 Chair: Welcome back.

   Malcolm Chalmers: Thank you very much, indeed, Chair. I'm the deputy director general at RUSI.

   Professor Patrick Porter: Good morning. I'm Professor Patrick Porter and I'm from the University of Exeter where I am also the academic director of the Strategy and Security Institute.

   Chris Stephen: I'm Chris Stephen, the Libya correspondent for *The Guardian.*

Q410 Chair: Thank you very much for coming. We have an hour for this session in which I want to try to get through the current state of play in Libya—particularly the politics and, to a degree, the military options there. I encourage you to be discursive but to be conscious of the fact that we are time limited. If there is further information that we are not able to cover in

this session and you think, "God, why haven't they asked us that?" please feel free to submit further written evidence in the wake of the session.

This afternoon, we are taking evidence from the Government's special representative to Libya, Jonathan Powell, and from the responsible Minister and our ambassador to Libya. In a sense, this session will help to inform us for those questions this afternoon. If you think that your point of view has been represented by one of the other witnesses, please do not feel that it is necessary to repeat it for the sake of reinforcement. However, we will need to hear discordant views and analysis from you so that we can see the areas on which there are different points of view.

My first question is: has the lack of effective government in Libya created a breeding ground for ISIL?

Malcolm Chalmers: The short answer to that is yes. Clearly, we have an agreement in principle to create a Government of national unity. Even if such a Government and Cabinet is to be created there will not be a single Libyan security force for some time to come. It will be a decentralised state in terms of security provision; a number of different militias in different places.

Even if there were to be that agreement—and we are close to one—you would still find a large part of the energy of the various different militias and official army focused on defending against each other, on the balance of power between the Misratans and others in different places. Therefore, the idea that somehow, very suddenly after an agreement, all the other Libyan forces will turn against ISIL is not correct.

It would be very welcome to have that political settlement and it would be a step forward. With ISIL, the numbers people talk about are of the order of 3,000 to 6,000 and probably growing, with quite a number of foreign fighters coming from other North African countries. Reports suggest that Tunisia is the biggest foreign nationality represented there. Islamic State seems to be encouraging its supporters in North Africa to go to Libya now, rather than to Syria and Iraq, so the trajectory is probably upwards, but it is still relatively small and weak in strength compared with the accumulation of all the other Libyan armed forces. The problem is that their first priority is not ISIL.

Professor Patrick Porter: I very much agree with Professor Chalmers. A lack of effective government is creating opportunities for the Islamic State. One thing we do know about the Islamic State is that they are opportunistic at moving into areas where there are rivals, to exploit cleavages, and to offer people resources and the ability to fight stronger and harder.

It is important to recognise that it also works the other way round; that the lack of an effective Government is something that the growth of the Islamic State can also cause. There is a very difficult symbiosis here. The growth of the Islamic State, particularly its capacity to threaten oil production in future, could make it much harder to consolidate this new order. It would make it much more difficult for it to be legitimate. So it could work the other way as well.

The Islamic State establishing a foothold and then expanding its presence in Libya is also attributable, at least partly, to the pressure that it is coming under in the Arab world in the Middle East, where the combined attrition effects of the containment strategy—the bombing interdiction, the pressure it is meeting on the ground, its inability to expand dramatically further—mean that it is looking for somewhere to re-establish itself. In that sense, it is not necessarily a sign of a strong, expanding movement. It is a sign of a movement that is looking opportunistically for other chances, because it is finding it much more difficult than even a year ago. I can talk more about that as we go.

Chris Stephen: I echo what has already been said. ISIS have a foothold—a number of bases in Sabratha, Derna, Sirte—but they have not got the two things that they have got in Syria and Iraq. They can't get the oil and export it. I don't think that they would be able to export it in meaningful quantities. They also do not have local volunteers. The numbers are actually quite small; they have not yet managed to convince the mass of Libyans to join them. Perhaps because it is a tribal society, people are resistant to that.

On the other hand, they are very powerful. They have inserted themselves, particularly in Sirte, between the two factions; between Dawn and Dignity, where there is a sort of no man's land. To echo the comments already heard, it is not an existential threat for those two sides. They are more worried about each other. Dawn and Dignity are in the middle of a civil war, a struggle. For them, ISIS is a nuisance, but it is not a threat to their future. I think that is one of the problems that Western diplomats find. When they meet Libyans, their priority is the other side. The priority of Tripoli will be Tobruk and the priority of Tobruk is fighting against the Tripoli guys. ISIS is something the West worries about, and Libyans sort of worry about, but it is not their top thing.

Q411 Chair: Is there evidence of any relationship between either Dawn or Dignity and ISIL? Obviously, the allegation will be laid that there is some kind of Islamist connection between the forces in Tripoli and ISIS? Is there any evidence to support that?

Chris Stephen: It is a very atomised society, so every group you look at will have sub-groups, and those sub-groups will do deals round the back with other sub-groups. Yes, they are clearly getting their weapons from somewhere. The weapons, and particularly the ammunition, must be coming across the sea and by air. One of the puzzles we have is why, if the UN wants to stop the ammo getting in, it has an arms embargo but does not enforce it. There is a lot of trade even between Dawn and Dignity. People move around and people trade. There are flights between Tripoli and Tobruk. There is a great deal of interchange even as the war grinds on.

Q412 Chair: How much normality is there in Libya? You were describing the normality of people moving around and wars going on in the background, but are people managing to live some kind of life?

Chris Stephen: It is getting a lot harder. The money is running down and the economy is running down. People are getting very, very weary.

Professor Patrick Porter: Oil production now has plummeted compared to even 2011. That is a lynchpin of the economy that makes normal life, compared to what people are used to, very difficult indeed.

Q413 Chair: Dawn and Dignity are very anxious about their position vis-à-vis the other principal player. How amenable are their leaderships to public pressure and the facts of declining resources and a standard of living that is dropping fast?

Chris Stephen: Pressure for what? Firstly, there is no pressure. The International Criminal Court has forgotten about Libya. It could enforce sanctions, particularly the arms embargo, but it doesn't. Looking at last year's committee of experts report from the UN Security Council, 12, 13 or 14 states are sending in enormous amounts of weapons— ammunition, helicopters, planes, everything—and to all sides. The UN has not sanctioned one of these things or given any sort of support. Stopping the ammo is one of the first things that would help. They talk about political pressure, but another deadline went by yesterday. It was the sixth or the seventh or the final deadline, but there is no unity Government. I expect the UN to say next week that it will set another deadline, but if you speak to Libyans on both sides they will say that they do not believe these deadlines. It doesn't matter.

Q414 Chair: Whose fault is this? Is it the responsibility of the international community, and Britain as a rather significant player within that community, to put this strategy together?

Malcolm Chalmers: We can understand how we got to this situation after the collapse of the regime. The struggle against the regime was conducted not by one single force but by a number of different forces. Once the regime vanished, they had different interests—local and regional interests. There is also the division between those who are more aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and those who are not. That brought in external actors from both sides in the Arab world, from Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Egypt and the UAE on the other. That struggle has gone through periods when it has been relatively quiescent in security terms, and then since 2014 it has become more open. There is some fighting now, but there is not all-out warfare. Tripoli and Benghazi do not look like Aleppo or Damascus at the moment. One of the purposes of international diplomacy is to avoid that happening.

There are local ceasefires in some areas. What there isn't is an overarching agreement. As I began to say earlier, I think that there is potential for extending local ceasefires, for having a modus vivendi between the major militia, not least because they have a shared interest in extracting their share of the diminishing rent from oil revenue. That depends on a certain degree of security in the oil facilities, which are not that geographically concentrated. Quite a lot of the bargaining around the Government of National Unity is about sharing out positions in Government and sharing out access to resources, which is inherently a very difficult situation. The optimist would say that in the end they will all suffer if there is a descent into full-scale war, but of course politics is not only about everybody gaining, but about relative gains. That is where there will be difficulties in the negotiation now.

The international community clearly bears responsibility in the sense that it is responsible for the overthrow of Gaddafi and has some responsibility for the aftermath. Those who say that we should have had a much larger stabilisation force after the invasion have to ask whether there was enough Libyan support for such a force after the overthrow of Gaddafi. I don't think there was. It was not like Sierra Leone, where there was widespread local support. A lot of forces on the ground were deeply opposed to international intervention. I suspect that we are in a similar situation today.

Q415 Chair: So this is the Libyans' fault?

Malcolm Chalmers: It is Libyans' responsibility for their own country.

Professor Patrick Porter: In defining the responsibility from where we are now, the first responsibility is to do no harm. It is not to do anything unintentionally or unwittingly that might exacerbate the situation.

While I think that there is a case for some kind of international military intervention, the great danger is that, in countering Islamic State with force, with locals on the ground, you unwittingly empower some militias and factions over others, which can then fuel other kinds of conflict and accelerate the destabilisation of the country. There is a very difficult trade-off between an effective military campaign and a political process. Getting that right is probably the major nature of the dilemma.

I absolutely agree with Professor Chalmers about the counter-factual that we should have put in an international stabilisation force. The rough rule of thumb in counter-insurgency is that ideally you need 20 troops for every 1,000 civilians. Let's say that is right. There are 6.5 million Libyans. On my crude maths, that is 120,000 or 130,000. I don't think we had the capability or appetite for that. It is simplistic to say that we should have just kept going.

For better or worse, the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime has helped plunge the country into chaos. The question is what to do now. Finally, I would say it is not all about us and it is not all about the Libyans. There are other international players at work here. It is part of a wider set of political struggles straddling North Africa and the Middle East.

Q416 Daniel Kawczynski: I have been listening carefully to what you have said, Mr Chalmers, but our own Prime Minister has repeatedly stated on the Floor of the House that we must wait for a Government of national unity. That has been a mantra over and over again and it has failed spectacularly. What responsibility does he and our own Government have for pursuing this clearly failing strategy, given our involvement in the situation in the first place?

Malcolm Chalmers: Part of the answer is that the UK does not by itself have enough capability to determine the fate of Libya. Even the West as a whole does not have that capability. We can shape things and make a difference, but the nature of successive interventions in the Middle East and Arab world in the past decade and more is that you can make a difference but you can't determine it. You just have to accept that that is the reality of such situations. These are not colonial times in which we can decide who is the Head of State of various Middle East protectorates.

Q417 Daniel Kawczynski: But if we instigated the process ourselves and destroyed the original dictator, it is difficult to stand back and allow all this carnage without taking some sort of responsibility.

Malcolm Chalmers: My personal view is that we should, as an international community—Europeans and outside powers—do what we can to achieve the objectives that we want. That is, first, to remove Libya as a base for ISIL but also, more generally, to create the stability in Libya that would be very much in Europe's interest as well as that of the Libyan people. We should be careful not to overstate the extent to which we can achieve that

objective. The invasion and regime change in 2011 is an illustration of the likelihood of unintended consequences. That is also the case for any steps we take now.

Q418 Stephen Gethins: Taking you back to that overthrow, if we are trying to take lessons for what else could have been done. What else could the international community have done after the overthrow of Gaddafi, if we are to draw lessons from that? Could we have spent more money, for instance? We spent £25 million on reconstruction—the military campaign, incidentally, cost £320 million. Could you comment on that and what lessons we should draw from that in our conclusions?

Chris Stephen: I don't think we did drop the ball on Libya; I think it was up to them. At the time of the revolution they had $158 billion in foreign assets. Money has never been the problem. Now it is about $109 billion. People often say that we dropped the ball but, when you ask them for specifics, it gets a bit vague. For those of us who were there, it was a very factionalised leadership. The British and the European Union were offering all sorts of things—all sorts of aid—but there is not a common civic thing.

I did a day training with the coastguard there once. They got absolutely no support. The EU was there training them but the coastguard were a national organisation, so they did not have a particular militia or a particular faction, and they could not get life jackets. A few days before we turned up, their captain went to see the deputy Minister and said, "The journalists and the TV are turning up. If there are no life jackets, they are going to film it." That is how they got the life jackets. I was given one; I unwrapped it out of the cellophane. I said to this young sailor, "Thank you very much." He said, "No, thank you very much because without you guys we would not have these things."

That was the reality. Everything that was not done through a faction was not done. There are lots of examples. I do not think we dropped the ball. They had their freedom and their democracy. In a sense it is their responsibility. But where we have gone terribly wrong is this unity Government are not based on democracy.

We supported the democratic election in the summer of 2014. We then recognised the resulting Parliament. Then Libya Dawn rebelled against the Parliament. We have spent the last year and a half trying to reconcile the two sides. What we should be doing, in my opinion, is say, "It should be within the Parliament." We should say to Parliament, "You have to give Libya Dawn a voice. They have legitimate grievances and it has to be done through the rule of law." You have an elected Parliament and a rebel group against that Parliament and we are trying to splice the two together. That notion does not seem to make any sense. We have now been through—we were discussing it outside—six or seven deadlines, because they can never get it right. We are going to end up going with the militias, trying to build some sort of fragile coalition long enough for us to agree to take action against ISIS, but is that in the long-term interest? I do not think it is.

The message we are sending, even if we have a fresh election, is, "If you have a fresh election and someone does not like it, you can rebel." Then the UN will come in and try to cut a deal between the elected Government and the rebels.

Q419 Chair: Don't they see our obsession with elections as rather quixotic? You tell us that the House of Representatives was elected but this was the third election inflicted on them in

three years, largely by the international community, and they managed a turnout of less than something of the order that the police and crime commissioner elections get in the middle of winter in England.

Chris Stephen: Turnouts are falling but there have also been 90 local elections with very high turnouts. You talk to anyone on the UN election committee or the Libyans; people are very enthusiastic about—

Q420 Chair: But the House of Representatives election had a turnout of 18%?

Chris Stephen: It was 17%.

Stephen Gethins: You were saying there were 90 elections that—

Professor Patrick Porter: Could I have a go? It is possible, looking at the counterfactual from 2011, that the UK could have invested more, without Gaddafi and with a hostile regime having been overthrown. What I would want to caution against is an overly developmental view of the politics of the country in that situation. It is not necessarily the case that you can attribute the level of stability to the amount of foreign resources being injected in. Why is that so? It is partly because people do not always perceive the same interests that we perceive for them and they may do different things with those resources. If you are talking about a set of Governments effectively in Libya who are governing more as patrons for certain sides at the expense of other sides, and if you are investing resources into that, that can fuel the grievance. Worse than that, it can implicate you in the resentment because you are implicated in what are seen as predatory policies. It can have perverse consequences. That does not mean there is always a case against aid, but there is a certain ascendant view that it is about being more generous in a post-conflict situation and therefore preventing a crisis.

It is certainly the case that there was a neglect of attention quite quickly. That brings me to my final point. There is a wider tendency in the foreign policy and defence debate in this country to be quite bipolar, moving from ignoring a situation to talking about existential threats. This is in that awkward policy middle ground where you have real but limited interests and real but limited power to shape it, and that is where we need to focus.

Q421 Stephen Gethins: Do you think that neglect of attention and the bipolar way in which we conduct our debates here may have contributed to the situation?

Professor Patrick Porter: I think we took our eye off a bit of it and we could have been more alert to the problems earlier, but I am sceptical about the suggestion that after Gaddafi there was a straightforward alternative way to fix the country from outside.

Malcolm Chalmers: May I come back to the issue of democracy? Democratic ways of resolving disputes with basically majoritarian systems work best if you have a stable state, if the main actors accept the rules of the road, and if elections do not pose severe existential threats to some of the key players. The more radical the change an election can bring, the less likely are those who will lose from that change to accept it, particularly in a society without the history of gradually getting used to elections and to the fact that you can lose one but win the next. We should be careful about transplanting those models on to societies that are

deeply riven on all sorts of other lines. It is not a Social Democrat/Christian Democrat division in Libya, in Iraq or in Syria; it is ethnic, it is confessional, it is Muslim Brotherhood versus others, et cetera.

In all those societies, whether Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya or Yemen, you may have an election as part of the political process, but the election is capping and institutionalising deals that have already been done, and the major folk, the leaders and elites who own power—military, economic and so on—see it as in their interests to co-operate and design a democratic system with checks and balances. Even in our own experience, in Northern Ireland we had to have a peace settlement before you could have elections that were viewed across the different communities as legitimate; much more so in Libya. As Chris rightly says, local elections have considerable legitimacy because, I suspect, in those local communities where they are successful, there is a sense of community—if you are in a particular city—but there is not that sense of community and there is too much of a zero-sum game mentality. Now, the Government of National Unity may have elections that follow, but I suspect that, for that to be successful, they will have to design the elections in a way that does not mean that one town wins—gets all the oil revenue, for example—and another loses.

Q422 Mr Baron: Part of our inquiry is looking at the UK's future policy options. This afternoon, we have the Minister, Jonathan Powell and Peter Millett joining us. Understandably, so far we have had a bit of a hand-wringing session here. Looking forward, given that we have up to something like 2,000 militias, according to some estimates, operating in the country, with even the petroleum companies employing their own petroleum guard militias and so forth, what do you want to see, going forward, as a means of trying to put this right, short of military intervention; or is military intervention now inevitable because of the number of militias?

Malcolm Chalmers: I am not going to give you a comprehensive answer, but let me tackle the military intervention issue—

Q423 Mr Baron: I am just trying to see what the options are going forward. Is it only military, or do you think it is a lost cause? I do not want to pinch anyone else's questions on military intervention.

Malcolm Chalmers: I do not think it is a lost cause. We need to keep trying. The dramatic fall in oil revenue is creating a fiscal crisis for the Libyan state. Immediately after the overthrow of Gaddafi at a time of high oil prices, there was a lot of money coming in and they had very high reserves. Politics was partly about getting access to that very large cake and distributing it among the people as well as the elites, so a lot of people were benefiting during that period. It was not stable, but it was not full-scale war either. We are now at a stage where none of that is sustainable; the revenue is coming down and the interest in a settlement amongst Libyan parties is increasing.

The way I would conceptualise the role of the international community is encouraging co-operation and settlements at local and, if possible, national level within Libya, and deploying resources behind that so that, when it is appropriate, we can provide training for security forces, the central bank or whoever it might be, and we can provide access to markets. If the Libyans genuinely want it—they have not had their arms twisted, but they

genuinely feel there is a role for external military support or whatever—we can provide that, cognisant of what Patrick was saying about the potential for unforeseen consequences if we are seen to be favouring one of the non-ISIL militias against another. There are lots of things we can do at a practical level, but we will not be the dominant player. The military dimension in the immediate future, and the reason it is all over the newspapers or has been in recent weeks, is specifically in relation to counter-ISIL operations, rather than operations that are designed to stabilise Libya as a whole.

Q424 Mr Baron: In the remaining two answers, can you focus on what you would press the Minister on going forward, if you had him in front of you?

Professor Patrick Porter: First, if I were in that position, I would press the Minister to say that we need an intensive diplomatic process with our Gulf partners to try to get them behind the process of creating a genuine unity Government—the National Accord order. I would also say there is a case for international military intervention, with the UK playing a role. As Malcolm says, this is about primarily limiting the capacity of the Islamic State to expand and particularly threatening the linchpin of the economy—the oil production—while doing everything possible to integrate that with the wider political process.

There is a suggestion, particularly coming out of the US debate, that there is a case for better co-ordinating mechanisms, like joint command centres, whereby intelligence is collected and arms are combined but there is a kind of conditionality on support, so that groups that we choose to support—our so-called worthy partners—actually have to do something to support the national unity Government, rather than getting it for free. We have to be honest about the limits of our knowledge and our power. We can do everything possible to at least harmonise the political process with military intervention.

There is a non-trivial case for meeting the Islamic State with force, particularly around places like Sirte and the oil installations. One of the things about Libya is that with open, flat terrain and a coastal shoreline, it is more open to some kind of military intervention. That makes it quite seductive as well, which is dangerous, like in 2011, but it is quite difficult for the Islamic State to do things like big oil exports out of the oil business because they can be met at sea quite readily. We have the ability to disrupt that.

As Malcolm says, it is possible in a very focused intervention, which is very different from the kind of intervention in 2011, but it would be doing everything within our power. It is possible that the political process will fail anyway. That is entirely possible. What we do not want to do is anything to make that more likely.

Q425 Stephen Gethins: On that, if the Government of National Accord is not formed and the political process fails, do any of you have any sense that there is a plan B for the international community?

Chris Stephen: If I was talking to the Minister, I would say that we have lost a lot of credibility with the Libyans because we change our minds. In the summer of 2014, we supervised the elections. We paid for the elections. We recognised the result. Marvellous. Now we are sort of trying to slice and dice between different militias. We have abandoned that idea. I think we should have stuck with it. We should have pushed for Parliament to be

the place but also said to the people in Parliament, "You have to obey the rule of law and you have to give a place to these people, even if you don't like them."

Our pressure—economic, military, diplomatic or whatever it is going to be—should be pushed around that. If you look around, what is the alternative? At the moment, these militias keep changing. The latest deadline fell because a new group was not happy with another group. We are never going to make them happy and we are going to end up supporting some sort of cobbled-together dictatorship.

Military options-wise, there is a plan to bomb Sabratha. They want to hit ISIS there. That is probably going to be militarily fairly easy, because if they run north, they get hit by the Dawn militias, and if they run south, they get hit by the Dignity militias. The Americans are already over there doing it, as I understand. Derna is not so difficult either. You have local militias. Sirte would be a big problem because ISIS are inside the houses. They now have 150 miles of coast, and they have basically taken out the Sirte basin. If they attack the oil ports, that is game over because it means even if you destroy them, the economy is now gone. It is the biggest port and the biggest refinery. Then Libya is not going to have any money, hence the concern.

Q426 Stephen Gethins: On that point, what are the alternatives to this? You touched upon it a little bit there, but what is the plan B if this political process falls over in the next while? Do you see anything coming out of any capitals in Europe or North America?

Chris Stephen: We are split, aren't we? The Pentagon and the MOD want to go in sooner rather than later. I don't know how much they have told the State Department or the Foreign Office about these special forces that are inside the country. The State Department and Foreign Office want to wait and give the plan more time. The defence people are saying, "The longer you wait and the stronger ISIS becomes, the harder it's going to be." I go back to what colleagues have said. Do we have the capacity to do this? How long will the operation be? The longer you leave it, the more capacity you will need to do it.

Malcolm Chalmers: There is a dynamic inside Libya. It concerns ISIL expanding, as Chris said, to take oil facilities and what have you, which might precipitate some sort of intervention. But clearly, there is also the possibility that Islamic State militants in Libya will use that base to conduct terrorist attacks on European targets. If one can hypothesise a 9/11, 7/7 or Paris-scale attack orchestrated from Libya, that would change the calculus here, and it would not be about Libyan stabilisation; it would be about substantially degrading the safe haven which the Islamic State has built there.

As has happened in the past, people would think about steps 3 and 4 after the intervention, not before. There, I think western states combined have very substantial military capabilities, should they choose to use them. You could send in amphibious forces; you could send people into Sirte. It would be very hard fighting on the ground, but clearly the Islamic State could not survive such an attack. Well, it could survive, but in a much degraded form. Then, of course, the question would be what to do, if you had a European occupation force in central Libya holding an area and facing an insurgency from Islamic State and perhaps from others. Question mark—who knows what would happen then?

That is one reason, of course, why nobody wants to go down that road at present, but it is clearly an option in some scenarios. Or you do something which is a bit more than you are doing now—a bit more special forces, a bit more training, some selective airstrikes against particular terrorism-related targets, maybe a bit more than that—seeking to contain Islamic State and make them change their ways of operation, because it limits them if they are always in fear. Even in the last few weeks there have been sniper attacks, killing Islamic State leaders there. That could be intensified. Who conducted those attacks I do not know; it may well have been other Libyan factions. So there is a whole range of military options. None of them produces an easy solution in the absence of a political settlement in Libya.

Professor Patrick Porter: Just building on that, as Professor Chalmers says, Europe, and southern Europe in particular, have a very strong interest in what happens on Libya's coast. The fear is that this could become a staging post for more in Europe. I don't know if there is a plan B, but my worry, even though I think that overall, the global containment strategy is slowly and incrementally working and there is a case for cautious optimism, is that another Paris-style attack or even something smaller might prompt a shift in domestic opinion toward a much more impatient, intensive roll-back strategy, where we are going for much more costly and high-risk strategies, including things like large-scale occupations, eventually. That could bait us into doing a lot more self-harm.

So although, on one hand, I think there is a very strong case to be made that the Islamic State is suffering in a number of ways under the combined pressure, it is the fragility of that in the domestic political realm that makes it difficult if they continue to carry out theatrical, spectacular attacks, which I actually think are also a response to their own setbacks. That is the political danger here.

Q427 Yasmin Qureshi: Can we explore the role of the Libyan national army in tackling ISIL and all this conflict that is going on? What is the army like? Is it a strong army with proper structures in place, or is it much more fragmented, with allegiances to different groups?

Chris Stephen: There is a factional question to ask on that. Do you mean the Libyan national army as in the armed forces? There is also a militia called the Libyan National Army, which is run by Khalifa Heftar.

Q428 Yasmin Qureshi: I am talking about the national army.

Chris Stephen: The army army?

Yasmin Qureshi: Yes.

Chris Stephen: In Libya everything is atomised.

Q429 Yasmin Qureshi: I am talking about the actual army. Who controls it?

Chris Stephen: The army is quite small, and most of the pro-Dignity, pro-Tobruk forces are militias. I think the largest cohesive force is Zintan, which is in western Libya. That is their biggest cohesive militia. The army is quite small; the air force is very significant,

because they have this air component. The army and the militias tend to think along the same lines. A lot defer to Heftar and a lot defer to other commanders. The other side is also all militias, but some of them are very cohesive. In Misrata, it is the biggest cohesive force there.

Malcolm Chalmers: Chris is absolutely right. If you look at the evidence you were provided with by the Foreign Office, which feels right to me, it said, "The capacity of Libyan central security institutions is minimal, and therefore the ability of the institutions to absorb support is limited." I think that seems about right. Libya actually lost another aircraft yesterday in counter-ISIL operations, so the number of aircraft they have left is diminishing very rapidly.

Chris Stephen: Everything is politicised. The Foreign Office are right that there is no third force. If you have a unity Government, there are no neutral soldiers or police. You are going to have to pick and choose.

Professor Patrick Porter: Yes, exactly. My reading of it is along the same lines. The debate is often couched in terms of technically improving others' ability to operate and to fight. Actually, the main problem is a political one to do with the orientation of military forces—armed forces. They spend a lot of their time at the moment trying to prevent their rivals from gaining ground, so it is actually a much more difficult thing than just increasing their capacity to govern and fight.

Q430 Chair: So the Libyan National Army, under the command of General Heftar, is just a name for a substantial militia. Is that right, and what is its relationship with the House of Representatives? What control does the House of Representatives have over General Heftar's Libyan National Army?

Chris Stephen: Both Parliaments have very limited control over their militaries. The Libyan National Army—as in the army—are under the control of Heftar, but also under the control of their own commanders, and they cross-match with people at the House of Representatives. You have the same situation on the other side. Basically, the militias and the armies are running policy, rather than the politicians.

Q431 Chair: So General Heftar is the most important person in running policy.

Chris Stephen: On their side, yes.

Q432 Chair: Give us an assessment of his character and objectives.

Chris Stephen: Well, he has had a very interesting history. He was once with Gaddafi, and then he rebelled against Gaddafi and fought very hard against him in the revolution. You would say he is sort of a maverick. He lived in Virginia for 20 years, and he came back. He sees himself as saving the country and is implacably opposed to the Islamists.

The most interesting thing is that he is perhaps the most polarising figure in the whole country. Dawn absolutely hate him, his supporters absolutely love him. Dawn condemn him as a new Gaddafi. His supporters like him because he is perhaps the one figure who you feel speaks his mind. In Libyan politics, on both sides, the real players are not the ones you see— the MPs and so on. They are being played by other people, so you are not seeing the real

leaders. They are always the seconds or the thirds. He is the exception. He is out there on his own. He runs his own show.

Exactly what he wants? He says he wants democracy and peace, and all the rest of it, but I guess you would have to ask him.

Q433 Chair: But your assessment would be—you intimated this—that he has a sort of Napoleon complex that he is there to save the country.

Chris Stephen: I am not sure it is a Napoleon complex; maybe it is a Churchill complex. He sees himself as the saviour of the country.

Professor Patrick Porter: In terms of his behaviour, as I understand it, it is a very extra-parliamentary view of his role—that he should not have to be vetted by the public. As I understand it, article 8 of the proposed new constitution is where this is all found.

Chris Stephen: Yes, that is why it is all going wrong.

Professor Patrick Porter: It could empower the Government to sack him. He is resisting that very strongly, so in that sense, yes.

Q434 Chair: So does he support the Government of National Accord in its formation?

Chris Stephen: No. Nobody supports it.

Q435 Chair: Nobody supports it? Nobody supports the formation of the Government of National Accord?

Chris Stephen: No.

Chair: Right.

Chris Stephen: Well, we support it.

Q436 Chair: What are the implications of the Egyptians' support for Heftar? Here is a nation of 90 million people with a very substantial military, next door, with a retired field marshal in charge of it whose attitude to the Islamists seems terribly close to Mr Heftar's. They have got a rather bigger stake in this game than the rest of the international community put together, haven't they? So what are the implications of that for what's about to happen?

Chris Stephen: Egypt and the UAE are the big backers of Dignity, and Qatar and Turkey are supporting the Dawn; there are international players in this war. As my two colleagues have said, getting the international players on the same side is a major part of any sort of peace deal.

Q437 Chair: What do you think will happen with General Heftar and the military force he has in this situation?

Chris Stephen: It depends on what we do, doesn't it?

Q438 Chair: But I think Professor Porter was suggesting that we might get drawn towards the simpler solution. Actually, I think, Mr Stephen, you said that we could end up supporting a cobbled-together dictatorship. That sounds like General Heftar to me.

Chris Stephen: No. If it won't be him, it will be various factions. That's what we're doing—we're running around trying to find some sort of moderate middle, or some sort of middle, or some sort of alliance of groups that together could stabilise the country, and so far it's not working. I think the trouble is that there is no legitimacy behind this, so as soon as this cobbled-together group starts to run the country and other people disagree, this group has no legitimacy. It's not based on anything; it's just based on the fact that we have decided these people should run the country.

Malcolm Chalmers: That is right. The problem is that for one cohesive group to run the whole country would require one party—whether it's General Heftar or anybody else—to defeat all the other groups, which would require very considerable bloodshed and probably wouldn't be possible without the support of an external power, whether that be Egypt, the United States or whatever. Right now, none of those external powers is prepared to back such a winner-takes-all approach, because it would be very bloody.

Q439 Chair: Are you confident? Well, Egypt's already been fairly busy—

Malcolm Chalmers: Egypt hasn't done it so far. There has been some Egyptian bombing, but it responds to particular atrocities against its Egyptian Copts. Egypt has shown no appetite for that bigger intervention; it would be a very substantial undertaking. It is not simply a matter of a few air strikes. If you are talking about the Egyptian army intervening in order to capture Tripoli against the opposition of a lot of militias, who themselves might be backed by other regional powers, that is a very substantial undertaking. Who knows what will happen in future, but so far Egypt has not been prepared to do it and I have not seen any signs that Egyptians are prepared to make a large-scale commitment of that sort. That is not to say that they wouldn't try to preserve the survival of their particular allies; that's a different matter.

Q440 Daniel Kawczynski: Before I ask my question, I must say that I am very grateful that Mr Stephen has accentuated what I've thought very strongly for a long time, namely that nobody wants a government of national accord, and I'm very pleased that you've got that on the record.

I will ask the panel a question. Regarding possible military intervention in Libya by the British and our allies—we believe that was discussed at the Rome summit on 2 February— what is your assessment of further potential British military intervention and how effective would it be, in terms of potential air strikes against ISIS and/or boots on the ground?

Malcolm Chalmers: There is clearly a lot of discussion in the United States and among allies, including ourselves, about a whole range of options. The first thing would be to establish what the objectives of such an intervention were. If it is about attacking specific targets that pose an imminent threat of terrorism against European countries, you can think about what that intervention might be—looking at particular targets and that's it, as it were.

If you are talking about trying to contain ISIL on the ground and ensuring that they don't take any more territory, then that is another set of things you can do, maybe focusing particularly on a combination of support for local militia through training, reconnaissance and so on, but also perhaps air strikes if ISIL were to seek to go on the offensive.

If you are talking about something more ambitious, about very substantially degrading their capability there, you are talking about a sustained programme of airstrikes at the very least, with much more substantial support to local militia—if you can interest them in the process. That could be open-ended. It could be like where we are now in eastern Syria, where the timescale could be months, but could be years, perhaps with no success at the end of it.

The first thing you have to do is define your objective. Right now we are at a stage where there is understandable concern that Islamic State is putting much more emphasis on its Libyan province than it has in the past. It is growing because of the weakness of others in Libya, for the reasons we suggest, even as Islamic State is weakening in Iraq and Syria. Because of that, there is a concern that the threat of terrorism from bases in Libya is also growing, and that is a threat to Europe, but it is also a big threat to other North African countries. The large number of Tunisians working for Islamic State could use it as a base for an attack on Cairo and Tunis.

Q441 Daniel Kawczynski: Obviously we have heard in the past that Egypt has demonstrated, or may have demonstrated, its support for Heftar through airstrikes and other measures. How would you feel about a concerted effort to help General Heftar and the HOR take over the whole of the country?

Malcolm Chalmers: That comes back to the point I made earlier. In order to do that, it is not primarily a case of defeating ISIL; it is a case of defeating every other group and every other militia in the country, which would require a very large military effort on the ground by whichever external force was prepared to commit forces. You would be talking about Egypt committing tens of thousands of troops, and all the associated support, for a long period of time.

Professor Patrick Porter: That would be a cure worse than the disease, in terms of the forces that would be arrayed against that effort. There is a whole array of factions, from federalists to the Petroleum Guard, who would very strongly oppose it, so we would be bearing a level of cost to risk for what is actually the UK's main and quite limited national interest, which is checking the ability of the Islamic State to threaten the Libyan economy— that is the core mission. I don't think it is the case that Islamic State can easily turn Libya into its ATM, its airport or its gas station, as some US senators are saying, but it is also not negligible, so I think it is better to see this as a wider international effort of interdiction to disrupt the Islamic State's ability to command serious levels of resources. That is where the intervention should focus in a very disciplined way, but the danger once you go into these things, of course, is that the tempo on the ground can expand it.

If you are going to do this even with occasional, very targeted airstrikes, you need some boots on the ground both to co-ordinate it through forward air controllers and to make an intelligence assessment of the locals you are working with so that you know who is doing what. It is very murky, but there is a whole spectrum, as Professor Chalmers says, of what you go in for. Do you see it holistically, in that you need to stabilise and fix the entire country

to deal with terrorism? Well, I think we've run that play a number of times now, and even if it is worthy, it is very expensive. But do you just ignore it? No, I don't think you can.

Q442 Daniel Kawczynski: You will have to forgive me, because I have question No. 1 at Health Questions, so I have to rush off. If ISIS, God forbid, got an even greater stranglehold on Libya, was starting to move towards the oil fields and was becoming a greater threat, could the United Kingdom and coalition partners go in to try to eliminate them without the sanction and authority of any so-called Government of national accord and the UN, or would we have to go through those channels?

Chris Stephen: We have the authority under chapter 7 of the original Security Council resolution, which is still ongoing, to go in and attack anybody who is threatening the peace. That covers us. About a year ago, Hillary Clinton reminded the Libyans that chapter 7 is still current. From that point of view, yes, one has the legal authority, but then of course you have to demonstrate that the people you are attacking are posing a direct threat. You can't just go in there and start tidying things up.

Professor Patrick Porter: Islamic State has very openly and very forcefully declared hostilities against the UK. It has effectively declared war. I am no international lawyer, but I don't think there is any ambiguity about the threatening nature of its intention. Obviously the preference of this country would be to have a full international mandate and an invitation from a unity Government. That is the preference, but it may not be the circumstances that are presented. If things continue to deteriorate, there would be added pressure to do something else—to go in more unilaterally or, at least, without the full consent of the UN, and without local invitation or without the invitation of the whole country. On the upside, there are enough local factions and powers in Libya that would support some kind of work against Islamic State. It is not a country that is open to the kind of sectarian exploitation that Islamic State can work in other countries. There are a lot of forces on the ground, so it would not be alone in that sense.

Q443 Mr Baron: Clarity of objective is terribly important when we are on the cusp of military intervention. I would suggest that it is a mistake that the west has made too many times in its interventions in the past. Are you confident that Rome was about focusing on ISIL or were they discussing something more? Given the state of Libya at the moment and the hundreds of militias that we have there, are you confident that the international community is clearly focused on what that objective should be? If it is to take on ISIL, how confident are you that it could be achieved? ISIL in Libya is a different objective from ISIL in Syria and Iraq in many respects. ISIL do not have to come out of their households—out of their huts, in many respects—unless they have to physically dominate ground at a particular moment in time, which requires troops on the ground from the west.

Chris Stephen: There are different options. It is a questions of how much pain you are willing to inflict on yourself. As has been said, if you send in thousands of troops and tanks, you will winkle them out, but you will cause tremendous suffering and all sorts of other things. That is the problem. At Rome, they were trying to shuffle this unity Government so that it would invite airstrikes, and then we would have our ground troops because the ground troops would be unity Government troops.

Q444 Mr Baron: Can I just press you on the objective? Is Rome saying, "There is no plan B on the politics. Let's move down the political scope with regard Libya per se. When it comes to ISIL, we are closer to the threshold of military intervention, whatever that may be"? Is that your reading of the situation at the moment?

Chris Stephen: Yes, because the only pressure on Libyans is—our thinking is that if we tell them there is a plan B, they will not sign plan A. The thing is to get the unity Government down, then it invites the airstrikes and it provides the ground troops. That is the plan. Now, are people thinking differently? Clearly, they are. The Pentagon is on the ground thinking, "Well, if that doesn't work, let's just get some sort of militia alliance together anyway and do these strikes."

Malcolm Chalmers: Chris is right about that. Getting a unity Government of some sort—on paper, at least—which would authorise airstrikes seems plausible. Providing the ground troops sounds much less plausible, but it depends what our objective is. Whatever the stated objective, the real objective could be more about containment and degradation of ISIL, rather than the destruction of ISIL. It is like the situation in eastern Syria. In the end, Raqqa will not be taken without local ground troops—

Q445 Mr Baron: But we have two tectonic plates here. We have so-called western or international support for a unity Government, which nobody in Libya seems to want. The political process looks dead on one side and you are telling us that we need that to authorise troops on the ground to take on ISIL. There is a disconnect, isn't there?

Malcolm Chalmers: We cannot at the moment say that we are abandoning hopes for a unity Government. I guess a hypothetical question that could be asked is: if we get to a stage in the next months where hopes of a unity Government have effectively dissipated for the foreseeable future, do we take military action in the absence of that? That would depend on an assessment of what such military action could achieve, which for me is the most important question. There is a strong case for considering some limited military options but the more large scale they become, the more problematic.

Q446 Mr Baron: So your assessment at the moment is that we are trying to go down—we have to say this publicly at least—the route of a peace process and a unity Government when, in reality, there does not look to be much chance of success, at least certainly from where we are at the moment.

Malcolm Chalmers: It has some chance.

Q447 Mr Baron: It maybe has some chance—and, thereafter, to see if we can get some sort of invitation on the back of that.

Malcolm Chalmers: That is right. I would say let's focus on whether any of these military options can achieve what they want on the ground. Let's not focus too much on the legitimacy question because the viability question is more important.

Q448 Mr Baron: Clarity of objectives.

Malcolm Chalmers: Clarity and achievability of objectives. You can have clear objectives that are not achievable.

Chair: On that note, the meeting is now adjourned. Thank you all very much indeed for your time.