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BRITISH INTERVENTION IN LIBYA WAS DEEPLY FLAWED

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A highly critical report by the House of Commons foreign affairs committee has seriously damaged the reputation of the former prime minister, David Cameron. It argues that the British military intervention was based on sparse if not faulty intelligence, erroneous assumptions – not least in its failure to identify the militant Islamist element in the rebellion. The decision making process was flawed because it denied some cabinet ministers the chance to make informed objections, a point which was all the more damaging as the misgivings expressed in meetings of the National Security Council came from no less than the chief of defence staff, General Sir David Richards.

This report may not be quite the hammer blow to **David Cameron's reputation** that the Chilcot report was for Tony Blair's but it does show that Parliament is playing its role. The report concludes that the former prime minister was "ultimately responsible" for failing to develop a coherent strategy on Libya. It confirms that many members of Parliament remain sceptical of military forays overseas, thirteen years after the invasion of Iraq. But the report does not tell us that respected British academics, such as professor Tudor Parfitt at the School of Oriental and African Studies, who were well appraised of the key role played by Islamists in the Benghazi rising which in February 2011 lit the fuse of the rebellion against Gaddafi and whose broader understanding of Libya was far in excess of anything on offer in Downing Street were not consulted. The Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera TV channels became mouth pieces of the rebellion, the later a mere mouthpiece of Qatar which, the report notes, "supplied French Milan anti-tank missiles to certain rebel groups ...channelled ... to favoured militias rather than to the rebels as a whole." The western media coverage presented throughout a very one sided view of the logic of events and Amnesty International was not the only observer in noting that they portrayed the protest movement as "entirely peaceful and repeatedly suggesting that the regime's security forces were unaccountably massacring unarmed demonstrators who presented no security challenge."

This is all too reminiscent of what a senior Bush administration official, Scott Libby told a respected US academic expert on Iraq he was consulting on the possible consequences of an invasion of that country. The academic expressed misgivings, not least about the idea of introducing democracy in Iraq which he said would

give the Shi'a a majority in Parliament, and hence Iran, much greater influence. Libby's answer was breathtaking: "You understand history, we make it."

Beyond the misgivings of Sir David Richards and the former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, Sir John Sawers, the Algerian government expressed its strong misgivings about the way the operation which was conducted to support the enforcement of the UN Security Council's resolutions 1970 and 1973 to protect civilian populations under threat of attack, and to enforce the no-fly zone and arms embargo which were morphing into something else. NATO acted fully within its mandate but to many people in the region and outside, that is not how it appeared at the time.

Neither resolution explicitly authorised the deployment of ground forces nor addressed the question of regime change and of post-conflict reconstruction. Two members of the Security Council abstained, China and Russia. Algerian security officials, who had a more intimate knowledge of Libya than many of their Western counterparts feared that regime change would result in economic and political collapse, inter tribal warfare and the spread of weapons from the dictator's well supplied armouries across the Sahel region of North Africa. Algeria's security forces understood the risks of the growth of Isis in the region because they had fought a bitter war against armed islamists, at a high cost in civilian and military lives, in 1992-1998. They knew that arms originating in Libya had significantly reinforced the military capacity of terrorist groups operating in their country as well as in Egypt, Mali and Tunisia.

The report makes very clear president Obama's disappointment that neither David Cameron nor Nicolas Sarkozy who was the cheerleader of the whole sad affair exercised leadership where stabilisation and reconstruction were concerned. The US president accused both nations and their allies in the Gulf of having acted as "free riders" on US military power. Obama had to contend with the enthusiastic support for French and British policy from his secretary of state Hillary Clinton but did not mince his words in an interview in *The Atlantic* in March 2016: his assessment of the war as a "shit-show" will hardly do David Cameron, or for that matter, Nicolas Sarkozy's reputation any good. The fact that NATO endorsed the campaign has serious consequences: it increased Vladimir Putin's fear of a Western hidden agenda of regime change; it made Barack Obama even more reluctant to contemplate any form of intervention in Syria at a later date, according to the US ambassador in Syria at the start of the rebellion there, Robert Ford.

David Cameron breezily refused to give evidence to the foreign affairs committee thus showing contempt for Parliament which Nicolas Sarkozy would no doubt approve of. As it is, there is not the slightest chance that the National Assembly in Paris will ever dare conduct such an enquiry. That is a pity because from the start, France sustained its push for international action in relation to Libya. The report notes that "a further insight into French motivations was provided in a freedom of information disclosure by the United States Department of State in December 2015. On 2 April 2011, Sidney Blumenthal, adviser and unofficial intelligence analyst to the then United State secretary of state Hillary Clinton, reported this conversation with French intelligence officers to the secretary of state. Sarkozy's plans were driven by a desire to gain a greater share of Libyan oil production, increase French influence in North Africa and provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position in the world.

In London, Liam Fox who was minister of Defence in 2011 is now in charge of foreign trade and a leading Brexiter. His reputation seems untouched either by the blatant lies of the Brexit campaign or by his mishandling of the Libyan campaign. He told the foreign affairs committee that the strategic goals in Libya never changed. That such a man should be in charge of Brexit beggars belief.

Five years on, Libya is a mess, caught between two seas, the vast Saharan desert and the Mediterranean. Growing numbers of refugees flow through this broken country of six million people, prey to kidnappers, extortion and slave labour, prey to death on land or at sea. A fragile peace rules in Mali but Isis is not defeated, the integrity of frontiers in North West Africa and in Europe is under strain and the cheer leader in chief of this sorry mess, Nicolas Sarkozy seeks a new presidential mandate in the French presidential elections next spring.

This episode suggests that Britain had learned nothing of its misadventure in Iraq, nor for that matter had the French. The US president comes out as a much more responsible politician. It is hardly surprising that it comes as little surprise that British members of Parliament are reluctant to get engaged in any new foreign military action. Whether Nicolas Sarkozy, were he to become president of France for a second time next year, has learned anything from the mess he helped create in Libya is anyone's guess.