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The coalition government and liberal intervention: Britain's response to the crises in Libya and Syria

Philip William Morgan

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the response of the Coalition government (2010-2015) to the crises in Libya and Syria. It examines the key drivers of British policy in both cases, focusing particularly on government attitudes towards the use and non-use of military force. While existing academic literature has discussed the “liberal conservative” approach of the Conservatives who led the Coalition, there has been very little empirical analysis of British involvement in the Libyan conflict of 2011 and even less on the government’s response to the Syrian civil war. The primary contribution of this thesis is to therefore fill this gap in our understanding of an important area of contemporary British foreign policy. This research employs a historical methodology to reconstruct the development of British policy and analyse the motivations and structural pressures that explain the decisions (and non-decisions) that were made during this period. It draws heavily on primary sources including parliamentary debates, the inquiries carried out by House of Commons committees, public statements made by Downing Street, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, in addition to statements, speeches and interviews given by key government ministers. Existing research has not yet taken advantage of the availability of these sources. In addition to providing a detailed empirical analysis of British policy toward the crises in Libya and Syria, this research also identifies a wider theme. Specifically, this thesis argues that Britain’s approach to both conflicts can be characterised by the presence of a particular world-view and a corresponding set of assumptions about the use and non-use of military force in situations of perceived humanitarian necessity. Importantly, these beliefs show strong parallels with the approach of the Blair governments and the philosophy of “liberal interventionism.”

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List of Abbreviations

AGO	Attorney General's Office
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CDS	Chief of Defence Staff
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
CW	Chemical weapons
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FAC	House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FPDM	Foreign Policy Decision-Making
FSA	Free Syrian Army
G8	Group of Eight
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HBJ	Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al Thani, Prime Minister of Qatar
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
IR	International Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
ISRT	International Stabilization Response Team
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee (UK)
LAS	League of Arab States
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSC	National Security Council (UK)
NSS	National Security Strategy
NTC	National Transitional Council (Libya)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OUP	Operation Unified Protector
P3	Permanent Three (France, UK, US)
P5	Permanent Five (China, France, Russia, UK, US)
PMQs	Prime Minister's Questions
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RAF	Royal Airforce
RBA	Rights-Based Approach
SDSR	Strategic Defence and Security Review
SNC	Syrian National Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

UNHRC
UNSC
WMD

United Nations Human Rights Council
United Nations Security Council
Weapons of mass destruction

Chapter One: Introduction and Methodology

The Arab Spring protests of 2011 spawned civil wars in Libya and Syria, posed major dilemmas for the international community and brought to the fore debates and divisions over the question of military intervention.¹ The Libyan crisis unfolded at a frenetic pace. By the end of February, after just a week of unrest, much of the eastern half of the country fell to opposition groups, aided by significant military defections. Yet by mid-March the regime's security forces were poised to retake the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, threatening the prospect of a humanitarian catastrophe and significant loss of life. In responding to the Libyan crisis, the British government under David Cameron played a major role in mobilizing a diplomatic coalition in favour of intervention against the regime of Colonel Gaddafi which led to the passage of UN Resolution 1973 in March 2011. A US-led intervention quickly established a military no-fly zone and aided the liberation of Benghazi, before America withdrew to a less prominent role, leaving Britain and France as the most visible leaders of the coalition. Ostensibly operating under the mandate of UN 1973, a NATO-led military operation played a controversial role in assisting the success of rebel forces in the conflict, culminating in the takeover of Tripoli in August and the capture and killing of Gaddafi in October.

In Syria, the violent response of the government of Bashar Assad to what were initially largely peaceful protests gradually dragged the country toward civil war, creating arguably the worst humanitarian disaster of the twenty-first century. On this occasion, and partly in consequence of disagreements over NATO actions in Libya, the international community was unable to agree on how to respond and no intervention was forthcoming. This did not prevent the growing internationalisation of the conflict, with several states playing a role in supporting either side in

¹Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams, "The New Politics of Protection? Cote d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 825-850; Tim Dunne and Jess Gifkins, "Libya and the State of Intervention," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 5 (2011): 515-529; Aidan Hehir, "The Permanence of Inconsistency: Libya, the Security Council and the Responsibility to Protect," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013): 137-159; Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum," *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1265-1238.

the civil war. While not among the primary actors in this unfolding cataclysm, Britain was consistently at the forefront of efforts to condemn and isolate the Assad regime in both the UN and the EU and joined other Western governments in calling for the departure of Bashar Assad in August 2011. Britain helped secure multiple rounds of EU sanctions and tabled three resolutions at the UN Security Council that were blocked by Russian and Chinese vetoes. In June 2013 Britain played the leading role in lifting the EU's arms embargo against Syria and government ministers publicly spoke in favour of providing military support to opposition groups. In August 2013, following the large-scale use of chemical weapons in Damascus, the British government pledged to join the US in a round of airstrikes against the Assad regime. Were it not for overwhelming opposition from Parliament, the Coalition government would almost certainly have participated in its second humanitarian intervention in the Middle East. On 29 August 2013, the House of Commons inflicted the first defeat on a British government on a foreign policy issue since 1782.²

This thesis is a study of the response of the Coalition government to the crises in Libya and Syria. It examines the key drivers of British policy in both cases, focusing in particular on government attitudes toward the use and non-use of military force. For Libya, the analysis in this thesis is limited to the period between late December 2010, when the Arab Spring first erupted, and October 2011, when military action culminated in the death of Gaddafi. For Syria, the timeframe is extended to cover the period up until August 2013, which brought to a halt the government's efforts to find a more interventionist approach to that conflict. To extend the timeframe beyond this would necessarily lead to a dilution in the detail and depth of analysis and would also invite consideration of a further set of issues, including for example the government's counter-terrorism policy in response to the emergence of Islamic State.

In addition to providing a detailed empirical analysis of these two cases, this research also highlights a wider theme. Specifically, this thesis argues that Britain's approach to both crises

² The History of Parliament, "The House of Commons and Foreign Policy: Lord North and Yorktown," 4 September 2013, <https://thehistoryofparliament.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/the-house-of-commons-and-foreign-policy-lord-north-and-yorktown/>

can be characterised by the presence of a particular world-view and a corresponding set of assumptions about the use and non-use of military force in situations of perceived humanitarian necessity. It was these wider beliefs and predispositions, shared by Prime Minister Cameron and other key members of his government, including Foreign Secretary William Hague and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, which best accounts for British policy toward Libya and Syria. Importantly, these beliefs were largely at odds with many of the self-images presented by key government figures, which often emphasised pragmatism, conservatism and a traditional conception of national interest.

This thesis argues, in contrast, that many key players within the Coalition government, and David Cameron in particular, were remarkably close to the “liberal interventionism” of the New Labour period. In both Libya and Syria, British foreign policy was primarily driven by what can be broadly described as “humanitarian” objectives, by a persistent moral fervour on the part of Cameron and other leading members of his government and by an ideological solidarity with the opponents of the dictatorships who were presumed to represent the idealistic promise of the “Arab Spring.” As the following chapters will show in more detail, British policy in both cases was underpinned by an optimistic and almost Manichean framing of the conflicts, alongside a set of interventionist instincts. Non-military options tended to be viewed as forms of “inaction” and British policy objectives, to the extent that these were properly defined, amounted to an agenda of democratic regime change. This approach was as impracticable as it was idealistic, but it reflected an ideological predisposition that brokered few alternatives. In addition, this thesis also shows how the world-views of a particular generation of political leaders were profoundly shaped by the legacy of Bosnia. The lessons they drew from that conflict displaced the more cautionary tales that others were drawing from the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan.

This introductory chapter serves two main purposes. Firstly, it reviews the existing literature on British policy in the cases of Libya and Syria. This brief review demonstrates that such a literature barely exists. Academic literature on Britain’s decision to intervene in the Libyan

revolution in 2011 is quite limited, while literature on British policy throughout the subsequent period of that conflict is non-existent. Academic literature on Britain's policy toward the Syrian conflict is almost exclusively focused on Parliament's decision to vote against a possible military deployment in response to the use of chemical weapons in August 2013. This literature is motivated by a desire to understand how and why Parliament voted against military action and the implications of this decision, rather than understanding why the government favoured taking this option to begin with. Furthermore, an exclusive focus on this episode leaves the prior development of British policy, including the imposition of strong sanctions, the decision to publicly call for the departure of the Assad government in August 2011 and the decision to lift the EU arms embargo in June 2013, all unexplored. This brief literature review therefore establishes the empirical contribution that this thesis can make.

Secondly, this chapter outlines and defends the historical methodology that has been employed for this research. It compares and contrasts this approach with the theories of "Foreign Policy Analysis," showing both the differences and the similarities in terms of methodological starting points. It defends an approach that is primarily empirical, evidence-based and inductive in its reasoning. This section also briefly describes the key sources of evidence that have been consulted in the course of this research and their strengths and limitations. As a work of contemporary political history, this thesis is built on the basis of detailed scrutiny of parliamentary debates, press briefings and government statements and the evidence sessions of parliamentary committees. It argues that the latter in particular are a rich and powerful source of evidence for understanding contemporary British foreign policy and are significantly under-utilised in the existing literature. The use of source material employed in this thesis therefore further enhances the empirical contribution of this research.

Literature Review

The "Arab Spring," the name given to the wave of protests that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and swept across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in early 2011, must

rank as one of the most important and impactful developments of the early twenty first century. It unseated longstanding autocrats, provoked civil wars in at least two countries and has been the incubator of both democracy and Salafist extremism. Taking place in a region that is geographically proximate to Europe and where Britain has enduring strategic and commercial interests, it must also rank as one of the greatest challenges faced by British foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. It was commonplace for government ministers to suggest parallels between the Arab Spring and the fall of the Berlin Wall, with Foreign Secretary William Hague declaring in May 2011 that the unrest was ‘‘the most important development of the early 21st century, with potential long term consequences greater than either 9/11 or the global financial crisis in 2008.’’³

The fact that so little academic work has been carried out in examining Britain’s response to the Arab Spring and the crises it generated is therefore noteworthy. There has been some literature on the response of Western governments in general,⁴ or that of the European Union,⁵ but these general accounts are relatively thin on detail. On British policy specifically, Jamie Gaskarth and Philip Leech have made an important contribution.⁶ They argue that Britain’s response to those countries most affected by the unrest, including Libya and Syria, can be best explained by the presence or absence of close security ties. The absence of such ties in the case of Libya and Syria explains why Britain was able to strongly condemn the governments of Colonel Gaddafi and Bashar Assad, while the presence of such ties with the Khalifa regime explains why Britain remained largely supportive of the monarchy in Bahrain. However, this approach does not set

³ William Hague, ‘‘We Will Continue to Fight Against Terrorism Wherever it Rears its Head,’’ 5 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-will-continue-to-fight-against-terrorism-wherever-it-rears-its-head>

⁴ Daniel Byman, ‘‘Explaining the Western Response to the Arab Spring,’’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36, no. 2 (2013): 289-320.

⁵ Tobias Schumacher, ‘‘The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness,’’ *Insight Turkey*, 13, no. 3 (2011): 107-119; Rosemary Hollis, ‘‘No Friend of Democratization: Europe’s Role in the Genesis of the ‘Arab Spring,’’’’ *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 81-94; Andreas Boogaerts, ‘‘Beyond Norms: A Configurational Analysis of the EU’s Arab Spring Sanctions,’’ *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2018): 408-428.

⁶ Philip Leech and Jamie Gaskarth, ‘‘British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring,’’ *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, no. 1 (2015): 139-160.

out to identify any causal mechanisms and is only able to explain *how* a particular outcome was possible, not *why* it happened. Furthermore, as it presents the response to both Syria and Libya as belonging in the same category, it cannot explain the differences between the two. For some commentators, the fact that Britain intervened in Libya whilst failing to do so in Syria is good evidence of inconsistency or double standards.⁷

Some scholarship has examined the decision to intervene in Libya in March 2011. Davidson provides the most detailed academic analysis of British decision-making.⁸ He argues that the “initial causal factors,” those factors present at the outset of the crisis, included an international norm, a threat to prestige *and* a threat to national interest (primarily the threat of refugees). Considerations about the costs and efficacy of any action being proposed were “contributory factors” that emerged during the crisis, while support from the opposition party and wider international community were also important “prerequisite factors.” Yet while Davidson provides the most sophisticated analysis of British policy, his primary purpose was to develop a nomothetic model of foreign policy decision-making for all states. Davidson also examines both British and French policies, and therefore does not have space for a more in-depth study of the range of evidence available to consider British decision making.

Echoing some of the broader issues that this thesis attempts to address, there is some literature which studies the response to events in Libya by locating it within a wider thematic context concerning contending approaches to the use of force. Daddow and Schnapper, for example, working within the “interpretive approach” of Bevir and Rhodes, identify a single tradition of thinking that has guided British foreign policy throughout the post-war period.⁹ This “bounded liberal tradition” is typified by pragmatism or scepticism toward grand designs, instinctive Atlanticism, support for a global free trade regime and anti-appeasement. The Libyan episode is

⁷ For example, Zoe Holman, “The Price of Influence: Ethics and Foreign Policy in the Arab Middle East After Iraq,” *Contemporary Levant* 1, no. 1 (2016): 12-24.

⁸ Jason Davidson, “France, Britain and Intervention in Libya: An Integrated Analysis,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2013): 310-329.

⁹ Oliver Daddow and Pauline Schnapper, “Liberal Intervention in the Foreign Policy Thinking of Tony Blair and David Cameron,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2013): 330-349.

understood as consistent with this wider tradition, and its occurrence therefore evidence of its durability and the continuity it brings to British foreign policy. Ralph, meanwhile, uses a comparison of the use of force in Iraq and Libya to introduce a conceptual framework inspired by English School thinking.¹⁰ This framework can be used to locate the beliefs of both Tony Blair and David Cameron, with the latter's decision to intervene in Libya seen as consistent with a "liberal internationalist" position, in contrast to the more hawkish "neoliberal internationalism" that underpinned Blair's case for the Iraq invasion. None of these authors analyse the decision to intervene in detail and it is this empirical gap that this thesis seeks to fill.

There has been almost no analysis of British policy toward Libya following the liberation of Benghazi.¹¹ Yet having sanctioned force primarily in response to the threat to that city, Britain continued to wage war on behalf of the Libyan revolution for a further eight months, stretching both the UN mandate and its own military capabilities to breaking point. The reasons the British government chose to sustain this action are not self-evident. Nor do the more general debates about intervention shed any light on the more specific means for which different types of military force are deployed. Answers to these questions are both important in their own right and surely necessary to feed into those wider themes that the existing literature has attempted to address.

The main sources about this episode currently available are a small handful of "inside stories," including the investigation by *The Guardian* newspaper,¹² Matthew D'Ancona's *In It*

¹⁰ Jason Ralph, "The Liberal State in International Society: Interpreting Recent British Foreign Policy," *International Relations* 28, no. 1 (2014): 3-24. See also Tim Oliver, "Interventionism by Design or Failure: The Coalition and Humanitarian Intervention," *The Political Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2015): 110-117.

¹¹ Ralph briefly reflects upon NATO's continuing efforts to defeat Gaddafi's forces, albeit from a normative perspective. See Ralph, "The Liberal State," 14-16. The only serious scrutiny of Britain's subsequent involvement in the conflict is provided by think tanks and members of the NGO community. See Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen, eds. *Short War, Long Shadow: The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libyan Campaign* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012); Christina Goulter, "The British Experience: Operation Ellamy," in *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, edited by Karl Mueller (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), 153-182.

¹² Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt "David Cameron's Libyan War: Why the PM Felt Gaddafi Had To Be Stopped," *The Guardian*, 2 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/oct/02/david-cameron-libyan-war-analysis>; Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt "How David Cameron Swept Aside

Together,¹³ Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowden's *Cameron At 10*,¹⁴ and Mark Muller-Stuart's *Storm in the Desert*.¹⁵ These accounts provide a more detailed reconstruction of British policy behind the scenes and make interesting claims about the differing views of those within government but do not offer scholarly analysis. They share in common a narrative that foregrounds the role of David Cameron, creating the impression of a strong-willed Prime Minister who overruled the sceptics in order to prevent "another 'Srebrenica.'" This, in short, is the relatively straightforward answer to the question "why did Britain intervene in Libya?" This thesis will test these claims against a wider and more systematic overview of the available documentary evidence in chapters two and three.

Turning to the Syrian conflict, we find almost no analysis of British policy prior to the Ghouta attacks of August 2013. There are two major exceptions to this. Firstly, the work of Christopher Phillips looks at the international reaction to the Syrian uprising and the response of major outside actors to that conflict.¹⁶ Phillips treats Britain as a secondary actor in this story, a state which cannot influence the conflict directly but must instead do so indirectly, through its relationships with the major protagonists.¹⁷ While this work provides a good overview of the "Western" response to the conflict, in particular the decision of Western governments to call for regime change in August 2011, it is not therefore an especially thorough or informative account of British policy. Instead, it provides an account of US policy which is occasionally interspersed with interesting anecdotes about debates and decisions in London. Secondly, the

Sceptics Over Libya Campaign,' *The Guardian*, 2 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/oct/02/pm-libya-sceptics-gadaffi-queen>; Nicholas Watt, 'David Cameron on Libya: We Are Not the 'Pull up the Drawbridge Generation,''' *The Guardian*, 2 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/wintour-and-watt/2011/oct/02/libya-muammar-gaddafi>

¹³ Matthew D'Ancona, *In It Together; The Inside Story of the Coalition Government* (London: Penguin, 2014), 159-184.

¹⁴ Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, *Cameron at 10; The Inside Story 2010-2015* (London: William Collins, 2015), 97-114.

¹⁵ Mark Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert; Britain's Intervention in Libya and the Arab Spring* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2017) Kindle.

¹⁶ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria; International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

work of Ralph, Holland and Zhekova provides a thorough and exhaustive study of the parliamentary record prior to the House of Commons vote in August 2013.¹⁸ However, while this both provides an essential contribution to an understanding of Britain's Syria policy and addresses some of the wider questions surrounding the ideational underpinnings of foreign policy, the primary focus of this article is on the "discursive context."¹⁹ The motivations behind policy are not directly addressed here.

Rather than understanding the reasons the government favoured military action in Syria in August 2013, scholars of British foreign policy have instead chosen to focus on the reasons Parliament voted against these proposals and the longer-term implications of the House of Commons' veto.²⁰ This literature has been widened by those who are interested in this episode less because of what it tells us about the role of Parliament in British policy, but more simply because of what it might reveal about the role of parliaments in foreign policy at a more general level.²¹ Given that the Syrian conflict arguably stands out as the worst humanitarian disaster of the twenty-first century, it is surprising that there has been no attempt as yet seriously to examine and analyse British policy toward it. Aside from the article by Ralph, Holland and Zhekova cited above, the only accounts of British policy toward Syria for this period are again provided by D'Ancona and Seldon and Snowden.²²

¹⁸ Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, "Before The Vote."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 896.

²⁰ James Strong, "Why Parliament Now Decides on War: Tracing the Growth of the Parliamentary Prerogative through Syria, Libya and Iraq," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2015): 604-622; James Strong, "Interpreting the Syria Vote: Parliament and British Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): 1123-1139; Jamie Gaskarth, "The Fiasco of the 2013 Syria Votes: Decline and Denial in British Foreign Policy," *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 5 (2016): 718-734; Patrick Mello, "Curbing the Royal Prerogative to Use Military Force: The British House of Commons and the Conflicts in Libya and Syria," *West European Politics* 40, no. 1 (2017): 80-100; Sam Goodman, *The Imperial Premiership: The Role of the Modern Prime Minister in Foreign Policy Making, 1964-2015* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 5-33.

²¹ Juliet Kaarbo and Daniel Kenealy, "'No Prime Minister': Explaining the House of Commons' Vote on Intervention in Syria," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 28-48; Juliet Kaarbo and Daniel Kenealy, "Precedents, Parliaments and Foreign Policy: Historical Analogy in the House of Commons Vote on Syria," *West European Politics* 40, no. 1 (2016): 62-79.

²² D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 355-362, 378-388; Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 325-345.

So far there have been no book-length studies of the foreign policy of the Cameron governments, but there are some articles that provide a more general overview, exploring the level and extent of continuity between the Coalition and its predecessor governments, particularly on issues such as human rights and intervention.²³ Naturally, such accounts cannot ignore or bypass the Libyan intervention as a defining episode in recent British foreign policy. Elsewhere, more up-to-date book-length studies of British foreign policy have often mentioned the Libyan intervention and the parliamentary vote on Syria in passing.²⁴ The works cited above all highlight the further need for detailed empirical investigation. Both Daddow and Honeyman see Libya as “cautiously realist”²⁵ and as evidence of a return to a more pragmatic tradition in British foreign policy,²⁶ whereas Houghton and Sanders see it as evidence of “liberal intervention.”²⁷ Garnett, Mabon and Smith go further still, drawing parallels between Cameron and the neoconservatives of the George W Bush administration.²⁸ In sum, this thesis is mapping what is largely uncharted empirical terrain. It represents a first attempt at a work of contemporary political history on a topic that has not yet been explored in a detailed way.

Chapter Two provides some contextual background by examining two rival philosophical traditions in British foreign policy. It unpacks the traditional description of British foreign policy as “pragmatic,” analysing the key components of this approach and its affinities with realism and philosophical conservatism. It then outlines some of the key aspects of the “liberal interventionist” philosophy that enjoyed its heyday under New Labour. This definitional

²³ Matt Beech and Paul Munce, “The Place of Human Rights in the Foreign Policy of Cameron’s Conservatives: Sceptics or Enthusiasts?” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2019): 116-131; Oliver Daddow, “The Use of Force in British Foreign Policy: From New Labour to the Coalition,” *Political Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2013): 110-117; Anne Peltner, “Competing Norms and Foreign Policy Change: Humanitarian Intervention and British Foreign Policy,” *International Politics* 54, no. 6 (2017): 745-759; Victoria Honeyman, “From Liberal Interventionism to Liberal Conservatism: The Short Road in Foreign Policy from Blair to Cameron,” *British Politics* 12, no. 1 (2017): 42-62.

²⁴ Jamie Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 110-111; David Sanders and David Houghton, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role; British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, 2nd edition (London: Palgrave, 2017), 189-190; Mark Garnett, Simon Mabon and Robert Smith, *British Foreign Policy since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2018), 303-315.

²⁵ Daddow, “Use of Force,” 110.

²⁶ Honeyman, “From Liberal Interventionism,” 54-57.

²⁷ Sanders and Houghton, *Losing an Empire*, 189-190.

²⁸ Garnett, Mabon and Smith, *British Foreign Policy*, 312.

ground-clearing goes further than the existing literature by defining and historicising two categories whose meanings have been taken for granted by current scholarship. The chapter concludes by briefly discussing the “liberal conservatism” of the Coalition government, which was conceived as middle ground between the conservative “pragmatism” and “liberal interventionism.” This discussion provides a conceptual framing for locating some of the wider arguments that emerge from this thesis and is revisited in the concluding chapter.

Chapter Three focuses on the government’s decision to intervene in Libya in March 2011 and in doing so it draws upon new evidence. Chapter Four is occupied with the equally important task of understanding why, having achieved the objective of preventing a massacre in Benghazi, Britain continued its military involvement in that conflict. It further analyses other aspects of British policy to Libya in this period, showing how and why force was used in more specific instances and interrogating the government’s attitude toward the possible diplomatic alternatives. Chapter Five turns to the Syrian conflict. It provides an analysis of British policy in the period between March 2011 and July 2012, showing the various steps taken to isolate and condemn Damascus in addition to explaining how and why Britain was largely unable to adopt a more interventionist position. Chapter Six shows how both Cameron and Hague came to favour intervention via proxy and reconstructs the British role in lifting the EU’s arms embargo in preparation for this step. It also reveals the details of a lesser known instance of parliamentary obstructionism, showing how the House of Commons effectively blocked the government’s efforts to arm the opposition just two months before the more emphatic vote against air strikes. Chapter Seven analyses the government’s response to the Ghouta attacks in August 2013. Rather than explaining how the vote was lost, it instead investigates why the government favoured a military response to begin with. Each of these chapters makes a worthwhile contribution in its own right but taken together they provide the basis for drawing a wider set of conclusions about the role of force in contemporary British foreign policy and the attitude of the first Cameron government to the question of humanitarian intervention.

Methodology

Mainstream IR tends to look for explanations of state behaviour in the international system, rather than providing analysis at the level of foreign policy decisions within states.²⁹ In contrast, a study of foreign policy must contend much more closely with the agential side of the equation as foreign policy is, by its very nature, a purposeful activity.³⁰ A more fruitful starting point might therefore be the sub-discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). FPA broke away from mainstream IR assumptions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In particular, the foreign policy “decision-making approach” developed in the mid-1950s by Snyder and colleagues has bequeathed a series of “middle range theories,” each of which examines a key aspect of the foreign policy process.³¹ FPA opened up the black box of the state, dispensing with the assumption that it could be treated as a unitary, rational actor, and began to examine in greater depth the processes by which decisions were made.³² It challenged the assumption implicit in much IR theory that the international environment could be straight forwardly mediated by those making foreign policy decisions, showing how psychological factors shaped the decisions of individuals and small groups.³³ It shifted the analytical focus to the individual decision-maker or the small group as the unit of analysis, making this rather than an abstract conception

²⁹ J. David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” in *The International System: Theoretical Essays*, eds. Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961), 77-92; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁰ Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3-5.

³¹ Richard Snyder, HW Bruck, HW and Burton Sapin, “Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics,” in *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, eds. Richard Snyder, HW Bruck, and Burton Sapin, (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 14-186. For background on the development of FPA, see Valerie Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 3-35; Steve Smith, “Theories of Foreign Policy: An Historical Overview,” *Review of International Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 13-29.

³² The most powerful critique of the “Rational Actor Model” was provided by Allison. See Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *The Essence of Decision; Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman, 1999).

³³ The seminal contributions to this area of literature were Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) and Irving Janis, *Groupthink; Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

of the state “the ground” of international politics.³⁴ This move implicitly promoted more multi-causal or “multifactorial” analyses, as the foreign policy decision-maker is understood as the point of intersection at which multiple factors or variables are at work, located at both the domestic and international level.³⁵

There are, however, a number of issues with situating the current research within this tradition. As Steve Smith explained in his attempt to introduce FPA into the study of British foreign policy, the explicit goal of all FPA work is the creation of “general theory” by focusing on “the regularities and patterns that exist for all states.”³⁶ Individual countries and cases are examined not as ends in themselves, but in order to develop or discover more generalizable patterns. As these are the focus of the FPA scholar, it must be assumed in advance that such generalizable patterns are both present and causally dominant. It is an approach that therefore automatically excludes contingency, idiosyncrasy and an understanding of historical context. Secondly, despite its undoubted commitment to multicausal analysis, the goal of theoretical integration has so far eluded the advocates of FPA.³⁷ The middle range theories cannot all be integrated into a single framework so the researcher must know and decide, in advance of the empirical investigation, which causal factor or variable they are going to focus on. Finally, FPA has undoubtedly suffered from its ethnocentrism, specifically its focus on a US experience. Many of those scholars who have a detailed understanding of how British foreign policy works have contended that models and ideas derived almost exclusively from American foreign policy cannot be wholly transferable to the British context.³⁸

This research shares some of the analytical choices made by scholars working within the “foreign policy decision-making” tradition but employs an historical methodology. The first

³⁴ Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3-4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Steve Smith, “Foreign Policy Analysis and the Study of British Foreign Policy,” in *Britain in the World*, eds. Lawrence Freedman and Michael Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 44.

³⁷ Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 185-210.

³⁸ This was especially true for Allison’s bureaucratic politics. See William Wallace, *The Foreign Policy Process in Britain* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1975), 9; Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, 41.

component to this methodology concerns the relative trade-off between theory and empirical work. Some would argue that history contains theory in disguise, and that without making these theories explicit, historians can do little but to add detail rather than explain how foreign policies work.³⁹ How much time and attention should be given to theory has been a highly contentious issue in the study of British foreign policy and British IR more broadly.⁴⁰ The study of British foreign policy has always been well-populated by historians.⁴¹ While many of these scholars have liked to brand themselves as anti-theoretical or carrying out purely empirical work, it is more realistic to say that they simply devote far less time to the explicit discussion of theoretical and methodological issues.⁴² The contention implicit in this historical approach, or of those scholars who are primarily interested in conducting empirical work, is that given the unavoidable constraints of time and resources, we are best served by focusing our attention almost entirely on the business of gathering evidence and mastering the detail, even if this leaves our theoretical arguments somewhat less sophisticated than they might otherwise be.

A second key component of the historical approach is the emphasis it places on evidence. As John Tosh explains, “the first test by which any historical work must be judged is how far its interpretation of the past is consistent with all the available evidence.”⁴³ This is not to accuse others of making assertions without evidence, but it is undoubtedly the case that historians expect one another to pass a higher evidential threshold than their equivalents in IR theory or

³⁹ For criticisms in this vein see Smith, “Study of British Foreign Policy,”; Smith, “Theories of Foreign Policy,” 24. See also James Barber, “British Foreign Policy: A Review of Some Recent Literature,” *British Journal of International Studies* 1, no. 3 (1975): 272-282; Brian White, “The Study of British Foreign Policy: Some Comments on Professor Barber’s Review Article,” *British Journal of International Studies* 3, no. 3 (1977): 340-48; James Barber, “The Study of British Foreign Policy: A Reply to Brian White,” *British Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 3 (1978): 266-269.

⁴⁰ William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22, no. 3 (1996): 301-321; See also, White, “The Study of British Foreign Policy.”

⁴¹ Steve Smith and Michael Smith, “The Analytical Background; Approaches to the Study of British Foreign Policy,” in *British Foreign Policy; Tradition, Change and Transformation*, eds. Steve Smith, Michael Smith and Brian White (London: Unwin, 1988), 3-25.

⁴² For examples of claims to be anti-theoretical see Joseph Frankel, *British Foreign Policy, 1945-1973*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1; Wallace, *Foreign Policy Process*, ix.

⁴³ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History; Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 4th ed (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006), 60.

political science.⁴⁴ Alongside this demand, there is a preference for primary sources, those sources of evidence that were produced at the time of the events being analysed.⁴⁵ Cumulative work thus takes place within the parameters of an implicit agreement that evidence trumps theory and that it is historical evidence, specifically the quantity and quality of sources that can be marshalled in support of an argument, that determines whether a piece of research should be taken seriously.

The third component of the historical approach concerns how this evidence is to be interpreted. As is implicit in the above description, this is primarily an inductive approach. Generalised principles or observations are not out of the question, but they are built from the bottom-up, from observing the particular before making grand sweeping statements. Deductive reasoning, which is far more typical in IR, works from general principles. For example, scholarship might assume that states act in accordance with an abstract category identified as a ‘‘role in the world’’ and working within this assumption, evidence will be sought to show the validity of such an interpretation.⁴⁶ Such an approach can easily lapse into working backwards from a conclusion. As Zara Steiner admitted, international historians ‘‘are suspicious of general theories concerning historical processes and view attempts to reduce the relations between highly complex and inconsistent human beings to formulae and games with considerable scepticism.’’⁴⁷ Rather than forcing events into preconceived categories, it is far more productive to attempt to allow the historical evidence to speak for itself.

Of course, it is far from self-evident how this idea can be translated into practice. In addition to the preference for inductive reasoning, three further methodological starting points help support this goal. Firstly, this thesis adopts an ‘‘historicist’’ approach in the sense of emphasising the

⁴⁴ Perhaps, as a result, their underlying assumptions are less open to challenge and explicit discussion as White alleged. See White, ‘‘Study of British Foreign Policy.’’

⁴⁵ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 58-62.

⁴⁶ This approach is taken, for example, in David McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014) and Jamie Gaskarth, ‘‘Strategizing Britain's Role in the World,’’ *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 559-581.

⁴⁷ Zara Steiner, ‘‘On Writing International History: Chaps, Maps and Much More,’’ *International Affairs* 73, no. 3 (1997): 542.

importance of time and place, and of context, in understanding specific events. Only a detailed understanding of a particular case will permit sufficient familiarity with the context in which the events took place.⁴⁸ Historians tend to prioritise the unique and the particular.⁴⁹ Yet properly understood, this historical approach merely means giving idiosyncrasy and contingency its due, rather than assuming *a priori* that the causal mechanisms involved in any given instance will belong to a category of universal regularities that will be observable for all states.

A second methodological principle that shapes how the evidence is interpreted is the commitment to reconstructionism. This means using the sources for the purposes of reconstructing the world as it appeared to decision-makers at the time, on the assumption that this is the most effective means of understanding either the perceptions that led to the foreign policy decisions, or the outcomes that resulted. This is clearly an area where there is much common ground between the historian and the FPA scholar. The “decision making approach” of Snyder and colleagues explicitly advocates “the re-creation of the ‘world’ of the decision-makers as *they* view it.”⁵⁰ Similarly, in Harold and Margaret Sprout’s seminal contribution to FPA, the distinction between an “operational” and a “psychological” environment makes clear it is primarily in the domain of the latter that we are to find our understanding of events.⁵¹ In this area, as with many others, the historians and the FPA scholars have far more in common with one another than either do with the IR theorists.

A final methodological principle that shapes the process of evidence interpretation is more difficult to codify. This principle was in fact best defended by Hedley Bull during IR’s “Second Great Debate.” There is an acceptance that the business of historical interpretation is sometimes messy and not always in conformity with what we might intuitively feel is “scientific.” As Bull famously argued in his defence of a “classical” approach to the study of international politics, there is simply no escaping from the need to rely on the individual judgement of the

⁴⁸ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 96-100.

⁴⁹ Steiner, “Writing International History,” 542.

⁵⁰ Snyder, Bruck and Sapin, “Decision-Making as an Approach,” 65, original emphasis.

⁵¹ Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs with Special Reference to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

researcher.⁵² From an historical perspective, it is an immersion in the historical detail and the sources pertaining to the research topic that helps sharpen and refine this judgement. In summary, the methodological approach adopted here places most of the emphasis on empirical rigour ahead of theoretical sophistication. It aims to develop a narrative that is supported by the historical evidence, with the latter category referring to the primary sources that are available. It favours a process of inductive reasoning that is historicist, reconstructionist and accepting that in the last resort, its conclusions are to a significant extent dependent on the judgement of the individual scholar and his or her assessment of the available evidence.

In addition to these methodological principles, a number of analytical choices have shaped the development of this research. Much like FPA, historians often hone their analytical lenses upon the individuals tasked with making foreign policy decisions. For the present work, this analytical choice is provisional. The focus of the narrative shifts as and when appropriate, in line with where the evidence takes us, toward an understanding of the questions that are the focus of each individual chapter. In many of the chapters in this thesis, much of the focus is on the views and motivations of David Cameron and William Hague. This is less of a theoretical choice and more a reflection of the empirical fact that these two individuals occupied the dominant role in shaping British policy. In the main though, this research shares with FPA the notion that the foreign policy decision-maker is the point of intersection for the many factors that shape decisions and outcomes. This leads to an approach that is unapologetically statist and ‘governmentalist.’⁵³ It assumes that in matters of high politics, particularly decisions about the use and non-use of military force, senior members of the government have meaningful agency and that it is they who must ultimately decide (or not) how to respond to foreign policy crises of the kind that are discussed in this research. Key areas of foreign policy are still dominated by a

⁵² Hedley Bull, ‘International Theory: The Case For a Classical Approach,’ *World politics* 18, no. 3 (1966): 366.

⁵³ For a recent defence of a similar analytical starting point, see Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, 1-40.

relatively small circle of elites and foreign policy as a domain of governmental activity is in some sense meaningfully distinct from domestic policy.⁵⁴

This more general claim about foreign policy decision-making is in fact consistent with the literature on the making of British foreign policy, which has generally painted a picture of executive dominance, particularly in crisis situations.⁵⁵ An alternative perspective suggests that in a world of “interdependence,” these assumptions must be radically revised as the distinction between foreign and domestic disintegrates and decision-making is spread across layers of multilateral cooperation.⁵⁶ This argument holds more power when it comes to Britain’s relations with other states in the OECD world, where there are highly institutionalised forms of cooperation in a range of areas. Many other aspects of the foreign policy portfolio remain susceptible to executive dominance and decisions about military intervention stand out in particular.⁵⁷ As Hague explained before the Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2011, “a sudden military crisis is of course something dealt with in *national capitals*.”⁵⁸

Sources

This research has been “source oriented.”⁵⁹ This means allowing the sources to shape the inquiry, rather than fixing a narrowly defined question from the outset. To the extent that some themes have been highlighted more than others, that is a reflection of what has emerged from the evidence, not a choice that was made to privilege a specific issue in advance. Such an

⁵⁴ Hill, *Changing Politics*, 37-40.

⁵⁵ Michael Clarke, “The Policy-Making Process,” in *British Foreign Policy; Tradition, Change and Transformation*, eds. Michael Smith, Steve Smith and Brian White (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 71-96; John Dickie, *The New Mandarins: How British Foreign Policy Works* (London: IB Taurus, 2004); Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, 12-58.

⁵⁶ Wallace, *Foreign Policy Process*; William Wallace, “What Price Independence? Sovereignty and Interdependence in British Politics,” *International Affairs* 62, no. 3 (1986): 367-389; Barry Buzan, “Interdependence and Britain’s External Relations,” in *Britain in the World*, eds. Lawrence Freedman and Michael Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10-42.

⁵⁷ Hill, *Changing Politics*, 57.

⁵⁸ FAC, “Oral and Written Evidence, 7 September 2011” *Developments in UK Foreign Policy*. HC-1471-i, 31 October 2011. Q. 75-77, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 89.

approach necessarily involves modifying the research objectives in the course of carrying out the research.

The main source for much of the research carried out for this thesis has been Hansard. There is a growing body of literature on contemporary British foreign policy which has drawn on this material.⁶⁰ This recent trend is not disconnected from the growth in parliamentary power in British foreign policy. A political convention has been established where the Commons now votes on possible military deployments.⁶¹ In parallel with this development, there are signs of a diminution of bipartisanship and, for the period examined in this thesis, the government lacked the inbuilt majority that other post-war British governments have taken for granted.⁶² These developments have made Parliament a far more important arena of contestation in British foreign policy, a development that is at odds with its traditionally peripheral role.⁶³

Existing literature has used Hansard primarily as a source for understanding parliamentary attitudes towards issues such as the use of force or Britain's role in the world. It is self-evidently a useful source for understanding the discursive, ideological and domestic political context for British foreign policy. In the words of Jamie Gaskarth, parliamentary debates can provide the researcher with a "window into the social construction of British foreign policy."⁶⁴ Yet unlike the works cited above, the approach taken in this thesis must take advantage of this source not simply for the less complex task of assessing parliamentary attitudes, but instead for understanding governmental motivations. This is more difficult because ministers face greater

⁶⁰ See for example, Jamie Gaskarth, "Intervention, Domestic Contestation, and Britain's National Role Conceptions," in *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy and International Relations*, ed. Christian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 105-121; Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, "Before The Vote,"; James Strong, "Using Role Theory to Analyse British Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War During David Cameron's Premiership," *British Politics*, (August 2018): 1-19.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-018-00095-z>

⁶¹ Strong, "Parliament Now Decides."

⁶² Gaskarth, "Decline and Denial."

⁶³ On Parliament's traditionally peripheral role, see Michael Clarke, *British External Policy-Making in the 1990s* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992), 114-134; Simon Burall, Brendan Donnelly and Stuart Weir, eds. *Not In Our Name; Democracy and Foreign Policy in the UK*. (London: Politico's Publishing, 2006).

⁶⁴ Gaskarth, "Intervention, Domestic Contestation," 108?

constraints than other members of the legislature and either domestic political context, diplomatic environment or security considerations may prevent them from speaking truthfully. Assessing the veracity of official statements is a task that reinforces the need for understanding the context and for cross-referencing with other sources.

Despite these difficulties, this research is conducted on the basis that while official statements made before parliament might sometimes be misleading, it will be rare to find instances of outright lying. Official utterances are also capable of revealing things other than what is intended by those who make them.⁶⁵ The language used by policy-makers often reveals in subtle ways the interpretive framework through which they perceive the world and the policy dilemmas that emerge from it. Further, rather than solely examining the more prominent debates as is typical for most research, the conclusions are formed on the basis of a careful examination of every single foreign policy statement pertaining to Libya, Syria or the wider context of the Arab revolutions. This includes not simply oral statements and debates, but also written statements and parliamentary written answers. A weakness with this approach is that Parliament is not in session all year around. There are periods where there is no parliamentary discussion of impending decisions. This occurred, for example, in the build up to the passage of sanctions against the Gaddafi regime in February 2011 and at the time of the chemical attacks in Ghouta in August 2013.

A second source that has been consulted for this research can be labelled as “official announcements.” This category includes official statements, press releases and transcripts of media appearances. These are now accessible and searchable through a single website and use of the internet allows for a more systematic and thorough use of this digital archive than might otherwise be possible.⁶⁶ In the course of this research every “announcement” containing the word “Libya” between December 2010 and October 2011 has been consulted. For Syria, the time frame is extended to August 2013. Ideally, these sources can supplement analysis of the

⁶⁵ Historians refer to this as “unwitting evidence.” See Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 106.

⁶⁶ HM Government, “News and Communications,” <https://www.gov.uk/search/news-and-communications>.

parliamentary record but this source of evidence becomes especially useful during those periods where Parliament is not in session. Interpreting these sources again requires an appreciation of context. For example, a press conference with the president of the United States is not the same as a more informal interview in a less guarded setting.

A third source consulted has been the inquiries of the parliamentary committees. The growth of the committees' power and influence is part of the trend in favour of increased parliamentary oversight already commented on, yet it has largely escaped attention from scholars of foreign policy. The committees provide an arena for the scrutiny and discussion of British foreign policy that is less partisan than the Commons and its membership contains many who bring a genuine expertise to bear on the subject matter. The evidence sessions, including both written and oral submissions, in addition to the reports of the committees, provide a fascinating level of insight into contemporary foreign policy, often going beyond what might be available from the parliamentary debates. When used in conjunction with the evidence from other documentary sources, the work of the committees provides a far more in-depth and complete picture of events. This source remains largely untapped within the literature on contemporary British foreign policy and certainly for the cases analysed in this thesis.

There are two types of inquiry that the committees regularly carry out. The first is subject-specific. An inquiry will be held, sometimes after the events in question, with a mandate to investigate a specific theme or relationship. The analysis of the Libya intervention in this thesis has benefited substantially from the Defence Committee's inquiry into military operations in Libya and above all, from the Foreign Affairs Committee's (FAC) 2015 inquiry into the Libyan war.⁶⁷ The latter inquiry provides a unique insight into the recollections and thoughts of some of the key players within the Coalition government throughout the Libyan conflict, including the Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary and Chief of Defence Staff among others. It is not simply

⁶⁷ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*. HC 950, 8 February 2012; FAC, *Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options*. HC 119, 14 September 2016.

a self-favouring selection of their own recollections as the witnesses are forced to go through a rigorous interrogation by the committee members.

The second type of inquiry carried out by the committees is a more ad hoc arrangement. The FAC holds a rolling inquiry, entitled ‘‘Developments in UK Foreign Policy’’ which typically meets on a biannual basis and discusses three or four of the most pressing issues in foreign policy at that time. Unlike the more formal inquiries, which include lengthy written submissions and are concluded with detailed reports, these rolling inquiries simply provide oral testimony from key participants, in this case the Foreign Secretary of the day. The Liaison Committee occupies a similar function for the Prime Minister. These evidence sessions typically only take place on a biannual basis and some are more useful and relevant than others, depending on whether the session coincides with a key stage in the development of policy. On many occasions, however, this provides a highly valuable source of evidence to supplement what is already available from other sources. For example, the FAC’s rolling inquiry met at the very time the British diplomatic delegation was pushing for a no-fly zone over Libya at the UN and David Cameron’s appearances before the Liaison Committee provide some of the most thorough scrutiny of his views on the Syrian conflict. In addition to these three main types of documentary sources, relevant policy papers (referred to as command papers) and other miscellaneous sources of documentation (e.g. publicly released intelligence assessments) have also been consulted. Interviews with participants have not been carried out in the course of this research, mainly owing to time, access and cost. However, this work is primarily a piece of documentary research and the testimony provided to the parliamentary committees, referred to above, does in fact include extensive interviews with policy-makers.

This research has also made extensive use of a limited number of political memoirs. It is not surprising that the key participants in the development of British policy are mostly yet to publish their own accounts, given many of them are still continuing their political careers or have only recently left office. However, we do have the memoirs of the Chief of Defence Staff, the government’s senior military adviser and a permanent member of the newly established

National Security Council, the nexus of foreign policy decision-making.⁶⁸ Lord Richards' memoirs cover the full period examined in this research and he makes some remarkable claims about the nature of British policy in both Libya and Syria. We also have the memoirs of several of the key players in the Obama administration in this period.⁶⁹ As well as the value of providing an intimate portrayal of discussions within the US government, these accounts often shed important light on the development of British policy, given the close relationship between the two countries. David Cameron's memoirs are due to be released on 19 September 2019 and will no doubt provide a stimulus for strengthening, refining and perhaps even revising some of the arguments advanced here. Unfortunately it has not been possible to take advantage of their release with the submission deadline so close.

A fifth potential source of evidence has already been discussed in the literature review. The "insider" stories have certainly provided some interesting details about events behind the scenes and are therefore especially intriguing given the lack of access to the official government record. Despite the obvious limitations of these accounts, there is no doubting the value of a narrative that has been composed on the basis of consultation with those who were close to or directly involved in the making of key decisions. Much like political memoirs, they often provide a useful overview of the climate of ideas. A sixth source of evidence is contemporary newspaper reports and other media outputs. This thesis does not attempt to carry out a systematic survey of contemporary press reporting, but it does use the contemporary record to strengthen an understanding of the domestic political context, to provide informed speculation of differing views within government and, on occasion, help fill in some of the blanks left by the documentary record.

⁶⁸ General Sir David Richards, *Taking Command; General David Richards The Autobiography*. (London: Headline, 2014).

⁶⁹ Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Robert Gates, *Duty; Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage, 2015); John Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), Kindle; Ben Rhodes, *The World As It Is; Inside the Obama White House* (London: Vintage, 2018), Kindle; General James Stavridis, *The Accidental Admiral; A Sailor Takes Command at NATO* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014); Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights; A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

In addition to the above-named sources, a number of secondary sources have proven of significant value. For the Libyan conflict, research by Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot was very useful for understanding the diplomatic machinations at the UN and Britain's role in them.⁷⁰ Peter Cole and Brian Quinn's edited volume was very useful in understanding the broader interactions between the international community and the actors inside Libya, particularly as regards the civilian side of the intervention.⁷¹ Mark Muller's Stuart's book, already referred to under the category of "insider stories" is also deserving of special mention here. While not an academic piece, it provided highly detailed and informed analysis about the relationship between the British government and the Libyan opposition, information that would not be available in almost any other source.⁷² For the Syria conflict, the work of Christopher Phillips provided a thorough overview of the international diplomacy around the conflict and the position taken by key outside states.⁷³ Finally, it is worth acknowledging the value of the reports produced by the International Crisis Group (ICG). For both Libya and Syria, these reports provided a thorough overview of events on the ground and the international reaction at any given stage in the conflict, often supplemented by conversations with officials and diplomats belonging to Western governments, including Britain.

Taken together, these sources are of much value in overcoming some of the unique obstacles that face a work of contemporary history. The changes to the power and role of Parliament mentioned above make both Hansard and the work of the committees a far more valuable source of evidence than might have been the case in previous eras.⁷⁴ There has been a general cultural trend within Western governments away from a traditional preoccupation with secrecy and in favour of greater levels of openness. No doubt this development has been facilitated by

⁷⁰ Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, "Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2014): 899-911.

⁷¹ Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, eds., *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle.

⁷² Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*.

⁷³ Phillips, *Battle For Syria*.

⁷⁴ The committees were first introduced in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher and the growth in their importance has been incremental. For relevant detail on this development see Clarke, *British External Policy-Making*, 124-129.

the impact of the internet. Twenty first century technology both forces governments to produce more information and at the same time makes the historian's task of accessing that information easier and quicker than ever before. There is also the recent trend in publishing, particularly in the United States, with individuals often publishing their own accounts within months of leaving office. For all these reasons, now is arguably a better time than any before to be producing a work of contemporary political history.

Chapter Two: Background and Context

Each of the main chapters in this thesis is specifically focused on one aspect of British policy in relation to either Libya or Syria. However, there are several recurring themes. Taken together, these chapters feed into a wider argument about the use of force in contemporary British foreign policy. In order to make this argument, this chapter sets out some necessary background that can serve as a conceptual framing for these themes. It does this by reviewing some of the literature on British foreign policy and what this can usefully reveal about the ideas and philosophies that have shaped its practice, particularly in relationship to the use of force for humanitarian purposes.

The first section discusses the role of “conservative pragmatism.” Scholarship has often described British foreign policy as traditionally operating in accordance with a “pragmatic” approach.⁷⁵ This chapter will draw on this literature to provide a clearer illustration of the main elements or components of this “pragmatic” approach. It argues that “pragmatism” is not apolitical or non-ideological in the manner its proponents would sometimes argue, but is instead indicative of a particular philosophy or world-view. While not entirely incompatible with liberal approaches to foreign policy, existing scholarship has been right to point to the stronger overlap between this pragmatic approach and the ideas of realism, both intellectually and in practice.⁷⁶ Underlying both is a set of conservative assumptions, justifying the label of “conservative

⁷⁵ Fred Northedge, *Descent from Power; British Foreign Policy, 1945-1973* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 24; Frankel, *British Foreign Policy*, 77; Christopher Hill, “The Historical Background: Past and Present in British Foreign Policy,” in *British Foreign Policy; Tradition, Change and Transformation*, eds. Michael Smith, Steve Smith and Brian White (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988) 40; Clarke, *British External Policy-Making*, 106; John Coles, *Making Foreign Policy; A Certain Idea of Britain* (London: John Murray, 2000) 33-58; Robert Self, *British Foreign & Defence Policy Since 1945; Challenges & Dilemmas in a Changing World* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33.

⁷⁶ Ian Hall and Nicholas Rengger, “The Right That Failed? The Ambiguities of Conservative Thought and the Dilemmas of Conservative Practice in International Affairs,” *International Affairs* 81, no. 1 (2005): 69-82; Self, *Foreign & Defence Policy*, 31-34; Beech, “Traditions and Ideas,”; Jamie Gaskarth, “Interpreting Ethical Foreign Policy: Traditions and Dilemmas for Policymakers,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 2 (2013): 192-209; Daddow, “Use of Force.”

pragmatism.’’ Although this approach does not automatically lead to a consistent attitude toward the use of force, it generally discourages interventionist tendencies, particularly tendencies that are rooted in arguments about ethics and values. The non-interventionist approach of the Major government toward the conflict in Bosnia was illustrative of this tendency.

The second section discusses the emergence of ‘‘liberal interventionism’’ during the New Labour period. It shows that despite the common usage of this label to describe the approach of the Labour government and Tony Blair in particular, it is generally poorly defined in the existing literature. This section therefore confronts these definitional issues head on, outlining some of the main elements of the liberal interventionist approach and differentiating it from the wider tradition of liberal thinking from which it has emerged. It rejects the commonplace assumption that liberal interventionism can be reduced to a ‘‘doctrine’’ and suggests again that it should be seen as part of a broader philosophy or world-view. While some have sought to outline this philosophy in reference to more abstract taxonomies that have been developed in IR theory, this chapter attempts to develop an historical interpretation, one that shows the interrelationship between the ideas and the context in which they were developed. Taken together, the first two sections constitute a conceptual framing for the wider argument put forward in this thesis.

The concluding section outlines the importance of the ‘‘liberal conservative’’ approach that members of the Conservative Party promised in opposition and after coming to power in May 2010. Drawing on existing academic literature and some of the more prominent foreign policy speeches and policy documents available from this period, it shows that liberal conservatism was presented as an approach that sought to combine realism and idealism. When placed in its proper historical context, it can be read as an attempt to articulate a position that was a middle ground between conservative pragmatism and liberal interventionism. Liberal conservatism, as articulated by both David Cameron and William Hague, was equivocal concerning its attitude toward the use of force. However, the overall thrust of the rhetoric suggested a fundamental

departure from the liberal interventionist ethos of the New Labour era and an approach that would be far more cautious and restrained in this regard.

Conservative Pragmatism

Successive generations of scholarship have emphasised the role of a tradition of “pragmatism” in shaping British foreign policy.⁷⁷ In the context of British foreign policy, this label denotes something more than is intended by its colloquial usage. Instead, pragmatism can be seen as an interrelated set of axioms and principles that tend to exist alongside a particular world-view. The first component of this pragmatism is its empiricism.⁷⁸ As Christopher Hill explains, “pragmatism should mean a willingness to face facts and to accept an unavoidable change without fuss.”⁷⁹ Implorations to focus on the facts are also typically accompanied by a hostility to what are regarded as “grand designs,” a phrase used to capture the pragmatist’s celebrated suspicion of ideology.⁸⁰ Regardless of the presence or absence of any such ideology, pragmatism as a “method” tends to rely on ad hoc solutions and discourage any over-arching sense of strategic vision.⁸¹ As a deputy under-secretary in the Foreign Office, quoted by Michael Clarke, said: “our skill is in *not* having a grand strategic concept.”⁸²

The second key component of this tradition is its consequentialism. Policy options are assessed not upon the basis of their intuitive appeal or the extent to which they conform with rules and principles, but on a sober calculation of their likely consequences. Malcolm Rifkind, who served as both Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary under the Major government, identifies this aspect as key to his self-description as a “pragmatic politician,” explaining how policy options should be considered, “on the basis of the likely consequences of the policy one

⁷⁷ See Fn. 75 above.

⁷⁸ Frankel, *British Foreign Policy*, 112; Self, *Foreign & Defence Policy*, 33.

⁷⁹ Hill, “Historical Background,” 40.

⁸⁰ Hall and Rengger, “Right That Failed?” 72

⁸¹ Coles, *Making Foreign Policy*, 33-58.

⁸² Clarke, *British External Policy-Making*, 110, original emphasis.

chooses and not simply on perceived ethical or moral considerations.’’⁸³ The third key component of the pragmatic tradition is its conservatism. What is presented as a non-ideological approach is often simply a reified version of the common sense and taken for granted assumptions of a particular point in time. As Frankel argues in his sophisticated discussion of the role of ‘‘pragmatism’’ in British foreign policy, many of those who claim to be pragmatic ‘‘simply follow conventional wisdom and pursue antiquated theories.’’⁸⁴

This pragmatic philosophy has a strong overlap with the ideas of realism. Pragmatism can often be invoked in support of policy positions that would resonate just as easily with a liberal philosophy of international politics, but recent scholarship has in general rightfully highlighted the greater overlap with realism.⁸⁵ Empiricism and consequentialism both lend themselves easily to realist modes of reasoning but both pragmatism and realism draw upon an underlying tradition of philosophical and political conservatism to such an extent that it might be more sensible to speak of a tradition of ‘‘conservative pragmatism.’’ This is an approach that shares with the realist tradition a recurring emphasis on interests. National interest is a concept that still retains its prominence in both popular and scholarly discussions of British foreign policy,⁸⁶ and in the tradition of conservative-pragmatism there is a disproportionate focus on this concept and its ability to serve as guide to decision-making. More importantly, this approach tends to take for granted a particular view of national interest, one that is status quo oriented and narrowly defined.⁸⁷ While there is an equally long tradition of presenting British interests as synonymous with the interests of the rest of humanity, this conservative pragmatic tradition, with its more narrow vision of national interest, is comfortable embracing the logic of realpolitik and prioritising British ‘‘interests’’ ahead of other considerations. In Percy

⁸³ Malcolm Rifkind, *Power And Pragmatism; The Memoirs of Malcolm Rifkind* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016), Ch. 1. Kindle.

⁸⁴ Frankel, *British Foreign Policy*, 115.

⁸⁵ See fn. 76 above.

⁸⁶ Timothy Edmunds, Jamie Gaskarth and Robin Porter, eds., *British Foreign Policy and the National Interest: Identity, Strategy and Security* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁸⁷ On different approaches to national interest in British foreign policy, see Adam Humphreys, ‘‘From National Interest to Global Reform: Patterns of Reasoning in British Foreign Policy Discourse,’’ *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2015): 568-584.

Craddock's *The Defence of British Interests*, which provides an overview of his time as a foreign policy adviser during the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, there is, for example, almost no reference to the subject of human rights.⁸⁸

The underlying pessimism means that despite its empiricism, the conservative-pragmatic tradition is one that has at its core a bleak perspective on human nature and a world-view that envisions, at best, a gradual evolutionary change in global order and more often, a persistence with an unjust status quo. This leads to a foreign policy outlook that is routinely lacking in ambition in its efforts to change the external environment. Lord Carrington, for instance, who served as Foreign Secretary under the first Thatcher government explained that, "I am a pragmatist, I have found all my life that the gulf between what is theoretically desirable and what is practically attainable is so wide that it is sensible to concentrate almost exclusively on the latter."⁸⁹ None of this leads automatically to a particular disposition toward the use of force and there is little within this tradition of thinking that speaks directly to issues like humanitarian intervention. Yet it is self-evidently the case that the above principles can be more faithfully recruited to argue against such interventions than they could be harnessed in their favour. It is by drawing upon ideas similar to those outlined above that Conservatives have traditionally warned against humanitarian intervention.⁹⁰

All of this was borne out under the Major government in the mid-1990s. The genocide in Rwanda, which claimed the lives of 800,000 people in just one hundred days, barely registered on the radar of British political elites.⁹¹ In Bosnia, Britain was more closely involved, but the international community's response proved inadequate to stem the tide of ethnically-motivated killings. This culminated in the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, when a poorly defended UN "safe haven" was overrun and 8,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered. In the build up to these

⁸⁸ Percy Craddock, *In Pursuit of British Interests; Reflections on Foreign Policy under Margaret Thatcher and John Major* (London: John Murray, 1997).

⁸⁹ Quoted in Coles, *Making Foreign Policy*, 48.

⁹⁰ Dan Keohane, "From Suez to Kosovo: British Political Parties on the Use of Force," *Contemporary British History* 17, no. 2 (2003): 29-48.

⁹¹ Linda Melvern and Paul Williams, "Britannia Waived the Rules: The Major Government and the 1994 Rwanda Genocide," *African Affairs* 103, no. 410 (2004): 1-22.

events, British policy, under the stewardship of Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, had consistently opposed new and greater forms of intervention such as the preferred US strategy of “lift and strike.” Critics of British policy blame this philosophy for allowing crimes against humanity in Europe.⁹² In his scathing and polemical attack on what he describes as Britain’s “unfinest hour,” historian Brendan Simms points the finger of blame for British policy at the “profoundly conservative philosophical realism of its practitioners.”⁹³

Liberal Interventionism

Liberal interventionism drew on a tradition of idealist or liberal thinking, but it emerged as a distinct approach in British foreign policy in the context of events in Bosnia and other post-Cold War developments such as globalization. In political discourse, the term was used to refer to an approach which embraced a greater willingness to intervene in the sovereign affairs of other states, often with military force, in order to prevent humanitarian crises and promote “liberal” values such as human rights and democracy.⁹⁴ This approach was strongly associated with the policies of the New Labour period and Tony Blair in particular and the Labour Prime Minister was happy to accept this as an appropriate label for his views.⁹⁵

Blair’s speech to the Chicago Club during NATO’s Kosovo campaign in 1999, referred to as the “Doctrine of the International Community,” was seen as a seminal statement of this position.⁹⁶ In this speech, Blair located the Kosovo war and the justifications for it within a framework which provided what many took to be a radical defence of military interventionism. Interdependence and globalization, he suggested, forced a fundamental rethink of some of the

⁹² Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour; Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Penguin, 2001); Matthew Jamison, “Humanitarian Intervention Since 1990 and ‘Liberal Interventionism,’” in *Humanitarian Intervention; A History*, ed. Brendan Simms and David Trim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 365-380.

⁹³ Simms, *Unfinest Hour*, 6.

⁹⁴ John Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars* (London: Free Press, 2004), 47, 123, 160.

⁹⁵ See, for example, the discussion of Blair’s foreign policy legacy in Liaison Committee, “Minutes of Evidence,” uncorrected transcript, 18 June 2007,

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cm/iaison/uc300-ii/uc30002.htm>

⁹⁶ Tony Blair, “Doctrine of the International Community,” 22 April 1999, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/154/26026.html>

key principles that had guided the foreign policies of Western governments. He declared NATO action to be part of a ‘‘just war’’ that was being fought solely in the name of ‘‘values.’’ In his memoirs, Blair described this speech as advancing, ‘‘a very simple notion: intervention to bring down a despotic dictatorial regime could be justified on grounds of the nature of that regime, not merely its immediate threat to our interest.’’⁹⁷ While Kosovo was seen as the ‘‘high point’’ of liberal intervention,⁹⁸ a similar set of ideas and beliefs underpinned subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, where military force was motivated by a mixture of security, humanitarian and political goals, with no shortage of idealistic rhetoric to serve as justification.⁹⁹

Liberal interventionism is often used in academic discussion of British foreign policy, but much like the frequent references to ‘‘pragmatism,’’ scholarship tends to take for granted the meaning of this label. For example, in the most cited article on the ideas that have influenced the approach of the Coalition government to foreign policy, Matt Beech twice uses the phrase ‘‘muscular liberal interventionism’’ but does not define this term.¹⁰⁰ In one of the first book-length studies of the Cameron-Clegg government, Rhiannon Vickers’ chapter on foreign policy twice refers to ‘‘liberal interventionism’’ without providing any definition.¹⁰¹ Oliver Daddow and Pauline Schnapper¹⁰² and Victoria Honeyman¹⁰³ also do not define the term, despite using it in the title of their articles. In some instances, liberal interventionism is used interchangeably with ‘‘humanitarian intervention.’’ In an edited volume on the history of humanitarian intervention, Matthew Jamison’s chapter on the post-Cold War period generally treats the two

⁹⁷ Tony Blair, *A Journey* (Hutchison, 2010), 248.

⁹⁸ Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars*, 47.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*; Paul Williams, *British Foreign Policy Under New Labour, 1997-2005* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 164-206; Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World; Volume 2; Labour’s Foreign Policy Since 1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 184-214.

¹⁰⁰ Beech, ‘‘Traditions And Ideas,’’ 349, 360.

¹⁰¹ Rhiannon Vickers, ‘‘Foreign Policy and International Development,’’ in *The Conservative-Liberal Coalition; Examining The Cameron-Clegg Government*, ed. Matt Beech and Simon Lee (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 227-242.

¹⁰² Daddow and Schnapper, ‘‘Liberal Intervention.’’

¹⁰³ Victoria Honeyman, ‘‘From Liberal Interventionism to Liberal Conservatism: The Short Road in Foreign Policy from Blair to Cameron,’’ *British Politics* 12, no. 1 (2017): 42-62.

as one and the same, while briefly describing liberal intervention as “intervention to safeguard and promote liberal democratic freedoms.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in a recent article on the role of human rights in the foreign policy of the Cameron governments, Matt Beech and Paul Munce explain in a footnote how they asked their interview participants what they felt about “liberal intervention” despite referring only to humanitarian intervention in the text of their article.¹⁰⁵

On the occasions it is more clearly defined, it has been reduced to a simple “doctrine” or a set of criteria governing the use of force. An attempt at a definition is provided by David Lipsey, who writes that:

The *doctrine* of liberal interventionism states that national and international goals can be advanced by decisions by countries, individually or collectively, to intervene militarily in the internal affairs of other states. Such interventionism, moreover, can be justified not only when the intervening power’s or powers’ national interests are at stake, but also in the interests of the people of the country concerned. In particular, intervention can be right when human rights are being denied, either by repressive state authorities or as a side-effect of internal conflict.¹⁰⁶

On other occasions, scholarship will address the same themes and issues that are implicitly associated with liberal intervention but will do so under the banner of terms such as “cosmopolitan liberal internationalism,”¹⁰⁷ or “neoliberal internationalism.”¹⁰⁸ Lawrence Freedman’s description of “liberal warfare” is typical:

¹⁰⁴ Jamison, “Humanitarian Intervention Since 1990,” 373.

¹⁰⁵ Matt Beech and Peter Munce, “The Place of Human Rights in the Foreign Policy of Cameron’s Conservatives: Sceptics or Enthusiasts?” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2019): 116-131.

¹⁰⁶ David Lipsey, “Liberal Interventionism,” *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2016): 416, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *British Foreign Policy*, 31?

¹⁰⁸ Ralph, “The Liberal State.”

Wars conducted in pursuit of a humanitarian agenda, and which are likely to lead to pressures for domestic political reform and reconstruction, I call liberal wars. The ideal type of liberal war is that it is altruistic in inspiration and execution. Such a war would focus on the balance of power within a state rather than between states and can be presented as rescuing whole populations, or particularly vulnerable sections, from tyrannical governments or social breakdown [...] Liberal wars are not pursued in the name of strategic imperatives but because values are being affronted. Interests might be involved at the margins, but these are unlikely to count as ‘vital’, except in the most enlightened terms.¹⁰⁹

Taken together, this scholarship assumes three important things. Firstly, academic discussion of liberal interventionism takes for granted the basic idea that it is both idealist and hawkish. Secondly, these discussions take place on the presumption that ideas matter. Whether or not such literature is written from a constructivist perspective, liberal interventionism is implicitly presented as a set of ideas that has played a significant role in shaping foreign policy decisions and outcomes. Thirdly, much of this literature represents an attempt to discern the presence or absence of a distinctive approach to foreign policy, usually through a close focus on the New Labour period and the campaigns in Kosovo and Iraq. In light of the definitional and conceptual problems highlighted above, the following represents an attempt to move toward a more coherent, nuanced and historicist interpretation of liberal interventionism. While it is fairly commonplace for the literature to treat it as a simple “doctrine” or a set of criteria,¹¹⁰ it is preferable to interpret it as a broader philosophy or world-view, within which is nestled a particular disposition toward the use of force. As has been argued by Freedman, the author of

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence Freedman, “The Age of Liberal Wars,” *Review of International Studies* 31, Supplement S1 (2005): 98.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Lipsey, “Liberal Intervention”; Jason Ralph, “After Chilcot: The ‘Doctrine of International Community’ and the UK Decision to Invade Iraq,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2011): 304-325.

much of the Chicago speech, the problem with criteria or “tests” is that different individuals will draw different interpretations even when applying the same criteria.¹¹¹

Liberal interventionism shares with the wider liberal tradition an idealistic philosophy which is often universalistic and, at times, teleological. It is idealistic in its tendency to see events through the lens of its own progressive aspirations for human development. From this perspective, global order is constituted not by states, but by individual human beings. Such a perspective naturally aligns with a vision that promotes individual human rights and issues of justice ahead of the stability of the states-system and the institutions that sustain it.¹¹² The promotion of human rights and democracy is one area where there is clear evidence of universalising tendencies as these political projects are taken to represent the natural aspirations of all people everywhere and as trans-historical solutions to complex global problems.¹¹³ This tends toward teleology when its adherents see these aspirations not simply as preferable and desirable long-term outcomes, but as part of a predestined path toward the fulfilment of a progressive agenda. For example, even after the problems unleashed by the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Blair still presented this as a key element in his own definition of “liberal intervention,” telling an audience in 2011 that “freedom is not a passing phase of history, it is an existential human impulse. It’s not a condition defined by one era, but the condition that defines the human spirit...”¹¹⁴ Such idealistic rhetoric can easily translate into Manichean thinking, a tendency to split complex local conflicts into black and white categories, the one

¹¹¹ Lawrence Freedman, “Force and the International Community: Blair’s Chicago Speech and the Criteria for Intervention,” *International Relations* 31, no. 2 (2017): 107-124.

¹¹² Freedman explains this as a “human security” logic which contrasts with an “international security logic.” The latter focuses on preserving the system of states and preventing conflict between them. See Freedman, “Age of Liberal Wars,” 93-99.

¹¹³ On the “universalism” of the contemporary human rights discourse see David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond; Human Rights and International Intervention*, 2nd edition (London: Pluto Press, 2006). For a more up to date application of this critique in the context of British foreign policy, see Paul Dixon, “Endless Wars of Altruism? Human Rights, Humanitarianism and the Syrian War,” *The International Journal of Human Rights*, (2017): 1 – 19: doi: 10.1080/13642987.2017.1314644

¹¹⁴ Tony Blair, speech delivered at “Facing Tomorrow,” The Israeli Presidential Conference, 21 June 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwzB5hXYOPE>

representing the march of this human spirit and those opposing it seen as evil.¹¹⁵ The idealistic tenets described above might echo familiar themes to emerge in critiques of liberal thinking, yet they need to be understood in the specific context of post-Cold War optimism. It is no coincidence that the ideas associated with liberal interventionism emerged in a climate of ideological self-confidence, reflected in claims of an “end of history” and the calls from some intellectuals for a revitalised form of imperialism.¹¹⁶ Even when not advocating military intervention, liberal interventionists position themselves on an ideological moral high ground from which they strongly condemn those who transgress liberal norms in international society.

Relatedly, a second key feature of liberal interventionism is the extent of its ambition and its confidence in the utility of military force to achieve its goals. There are clear parallels here with neoconservatism, the controversial ideology of the George W Bush administration with which Britain became closely aligned. The “neocons” promoted the unilateral use of US military power to establish democratic governments across the Middle East, a project that quickly became bogged down in the sectarian-fuelled civil war in Iraq. While this was clearly an ideology that was shaped by a specifically American context, neoconservatism inspired the creation of the Henry Jackson Society in Britain, which found powerful supporters on both sides of the partisan divide.¹¹⁷ At a more abstract level, Blair and others were certainly comfortable with this hawkish idealism.¹¹⁸ Although its proponents often rightly pointed out that such ideas were largely derived from liberal or idealist traditions of foreign policy thinking,

¹¹⁵ For examples of Blair’s Manichean thinking, see Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars*, 123; Oliver Daddow and Jamie Gaskarth, “From Value Protection to Value Promotion: Interpreting British Security Policy,” in *Interpreting Global Security*, ed. Mark Bevir, Oliver Daddow and Ian Hall (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 149. It should be noted, however, that this tendency is often seen as rooted in Blair’s psychology, rather than emerging from a wider philosophy or ideology. See, for example, Stephen Dyson, “Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair’s Iraq Decisions,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2, no. 3 (2006): 289-306.

¹¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992). For a good example of the intellectual advocacy of imperialism during this period from someone working inside the British government during this period, see Robert Cooper, “The New Liberal Imperialism,” *The Guardian*, 7 April 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/07/1>

¹¹⁷ Klaus Dodds and Stuart Elden, “Thinking Ahead: David Cameron, the Henry Jackson Society and British Neo-Conservatism,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2008): 347-363.

¹¹⁸ Blair, *A Journey*, 388, 434.

it is perhaps in this enthusiasm for military solutions that it departs so sharply from the liberal traditions that had shaped the Labour Party's approach to world order. A key component of Labour's liberal internationalism has been an anti-militarist streak. This tendency has manifested itself in different ways, but it has sometimes led to a suspicion of the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy.¹¹⁹ The Blair governments, in contrast, demonstrated a far greater faith in the value and utility of force.¹²⁰ As Rhiannon Vickers observed in her lengthy history of Labour's approach to foreign policy, "one of the biggest surprises of the Blair years was that he came to believe in the efficacy of the use of force as a foreign policy instrument, both as the 'right' thing to do for humanitarian reasons as well as being a valuable component of foreign policy in the longer-term pursuit of peace and international security."¹²¹

Furthermore, liberal interventionism not only disregards scepticism toward the use of force for humanitarian purposes, it also sees military action as a powerful instrument for effecting more substantive liberal goals such as democracy promotion. As Freedman explains in his examination of "liberal warfare," the goal is not simply to prevent mass atrocities but to create democratic political structures in the target states.¹²² This support for "regime change" was a key feature of the New Labour period but it often provoked criticism that British objectives were poorly defined as openly championing such goals was politically controversial.¹²³ Liberal intervention therefore entails more than humanitarian intervention, even where it encompasses the latter.

The decision-maker's private moral calculus is often what takes precedence in shaping liberal interventionist foreign policy action. Blair was clear, particularly in regard to the Kosovo conflict, that he saw it primarily as a "moral" dilemma and that whatever his conception of

¹¹⁹ Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World, Volume 1; The Evolution of Labour's Foreign Policy 1900-1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 7-8.

¹²⁰ Williams, *British Foreign Policy*, 25.

¹²¹ Vickers, *Labour Party and the World, Volume 2*, 21-22.

¹²² Freedman, "Age Of Liberal Wars," 96, 98.

¹²³ On the pursuit of "regime change" during this period of British foreign policy, see Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*.

British interests, they were not the key determinant of his decision-making.¹²⁴ In his memoirs, he goes on to acknowledge that, “posing and answering a moral question doesn’t inexorably lead to a military solution, but it establishes a framework that can do so. And it is a structure with a plainly different starting point from that of traditional foreign policy, which is: is this in our country’s interests?”¹²⁵ Despite some inconsistency, Blair was quite willing to knowingly allow his moral judgements to shape policy, even in situations where there were significant domestic political costs, as he showed again in his uncompromising support for Israel during the Lebanon War in 2006.¹²⁶ However, the Labour leader was not alone in his preoccupation with morality and this attitude can be seen as part of a trend toward more “ethical” foreign policies. In 1997 New Labour’s Foreign Secretary Robin Cook announced that British foreign policy must have an “ethical dimension,” a controversial pledge that provoked a sustained academic commentary on the ethics of British foreign policy.¹²⁷ While there are many aspects of continuity between New Labour’s foreign policy and that of its predecessors, some have seen this as the inauguration of a genuine change, at least in the language of British foreign policy, the benchmarks against which it is assessed and perhaps even its ideological foundations.¹²⁸ The ethical turn in British foreign policy can therefore be read as part and parcel of the liberal

¹²⁴ Blair, *A Journey*, 228.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹²⁶ Toby Greene, “When Conviction Trumps Domestic Politics: Tony Blair and the Second Lebanon War,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 1 (2019): 43-64.

¹²⁷ Robin Cook, speech delivered at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 12 May 1997, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy>. For key contributions to the debate on the “ethical dimension” see Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne, “Good International Citizenship: A Third Way for British Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1998): 847-870; Paul Williams, “The Rise and Fall of the ‘Ethical Dimension’: Presentation and Practice in New Labour’s Foreign Policy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2002): 53-64; David Chandler, “Rhetoric Without Responsibility: The Attraction of ‘Ethical’ Foreign Policy,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 295-316.

¹²⁸ For emphasis on continuity with past policy, see Mark Curtis *Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage, 2003); Oliver Daddow and Jamie Gaskarth, eds., *British Foreign Policy: The New Labour Years* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Oliver Daddow, “The Use of Force in British Foreign Policy: From New Labour to the Coalition,” *Political Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2013): 110-117. For emphasis on change and discontinuity, see Christopher Hill, “Foreign Policy,” in *The Blair Effect: The Blair Government 1997-2001*, ed. Anthony Seldon, (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 331-354; Williams, *British Foreign Policy*, 15-31, 141-163; Jamie Gaskarth, “Ethical Foreign Policies or Empty Promises? New Labour and Human Rights in British Foreign Policymaking,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 1 (2006): 45-60.

interventionist philosophy or at the very least, a substantial aspect of the ideological backdrop against which its core tenets were rehearsed in the years ahead. Additionally, while noting the centrality of ethical or moral considerations in the liberal interventionist approach, it is worth highlighting that such advocacy has generally taken for granted a *particular type* of ethical reasoning. The moral arguments made by Blair and others typically appealed to an intuitive sense of right and wrong, less so a careful deliberation of the likely consequences of any given proposal. This was reflected in Blair's axiomatic loyalty to the "right thing to do" as if this label captured something that was self-evident.¹²⁹

There is arguably a wider context to this also. Liberal interventionism often involves the promotion of what are, ostensibly at least, humanitarian objectives. Yet the kind of humanitarianism taken for granted in liberal interventionist discourse is part of the abandonment of classical humanitarianism and changing approaches to the conception of international justice that took place within the NGO community from the 1970s onwards, reaching its apotheosis in the post-Cold War period.¹³⁰ While classical humanitarianism, exemplified by the International Committee of the Red Cross, was premised on principles such as neutrality, the servicing of basic human needs and a willingness to embrace compromise solutions in the interests of peace, such thinking was increasingly challenged by NGOs who advocated an alternative "rights-based approach" (RBA).¹³¹ The RBA discourse promoted human rights alongside and sometimes ahead of basic human needs, was more willing to abandon neutrality to align with one side in a conflict (or with Western governments intervening) and called for purer solutions that represented justice even at the cost of peace.¹³²

¹²⁹ Blair, *A Journey*, 412.

¹³⁰ For relevant background see Alex De Waal, *Famine Crimes; Politics & The Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Chandler, *Kosovo to Kabul*. For the relevance of these ideas to contemporary British foreign policy see Dixon, "Endless Wars Of Altruism?" 1-11.

¹³¹ Chandler, *Kosovo to Kabul*, 21-52.

¹³² Ibid; De Waal, *Famine Crimes*, 72-77.

The liberal interventionist philosophy presented a twofold challenge to the role of national interest in British foreign policy. Firstly, a natural concomitant of the privileging of moral considerations was that national interest, while not completely marginalised, was certainly relegated in the pecking order of governmental priorities. Secondly, liberal interventionism in any case promoted a revised and expansive conception of national interest. Traditionally, the vision of national interest taken for granted by British elites was quite narrowly restricted and consistent with realist themes, but the debates over Bosnia in the mid-1990s opened up the grounds for a conceptual shift. Politicians on left and right began challenging the assumption that Britain had no major interests at stake in the conflict by pointing to the threat to regional stability and the damage to the credibility of key multilateral institutions like NATO.¹³³ Blair's Kosovo speech provided a justification of intervention by situating it within the perceived structural imperatives of globalization, captured in the punchy maxim that "we are all internationalists now."¹³⁴ While arguments about the strategic implications of interdependence were hardly novel, this was being delivered in a climate where "globalization" was seen as a new form of interdependence that was both quantitatively and qualitatively different from its predecessors.¹³⁵ Liberal interventionism claimed to be driven first and foremost by a basic sense of right and wrong, but the notion of a "globalized" world enabled its proponents to present their prescriptions as making sound strategic sense also. The ending of the Cold War also facilitated this shift. As Daddow and Gaskarth argue, the removal of a decades-long foe created a radical dilemma for British foreign policy in the 1990s. The solution, they argue, was no longer the mere protection of values through the guarding of territory, but the promotion of values abroad through a more interventionist agenda.¹³⁶ Liberal intervention therefore provided

¹³³ David McCourt, "Embracing Humanitarian Intervention: Atlanticism and the UK Interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 2 (2013): 246-262; Tim Oliver, "Humanitarian Intervention and Foreign Policy in the Conservative-led Coalition," *Parliamentary Affairs* 67, no. 1 (2014): 105-107.

¹³⁴ Blair, "Doctrine of International Community."

¹³⁵ On the importance of globalization in shaping post-Cold War British foreign policy, see Daddow and Gaskarth, "From Value Protection," 146-150.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 143-150.

an updated vehicle for the survival of historic notions of Britain's moral leadership in a changing global environment.

Another key aspect of the liberal interventionist approach is its ambiguous attitude toward international law and contingent support for multilateral processes. The question of when to intervene in the domestic affairs of another state has long divided liberal thinking. As Ralph has shown, this faultline has played itself out in the context of British foreign policy, as the traditional liberal preference for multilateralism and international law often furnishes a liberal argument against intervention.¹³⁷ Those who might identify with a classical liberal tradition are also more cautious about the long-term implications of bypassing international law and multilateral decision-making processes, and worry a resort to such actions might provoke a conservative “counter-offensive.”¹³⁸ In comparison to those liberals who prioritise such considerations, liberal interventionists are more willing to embrace controversial legal arguments or operate with smaller coalitions of the willing. This is in part a consequence of the extent to which liberal interventionism prioritises the ethical considerations of the individual decision-maker and possesses a greater ideological self-confidence than classical liberal internationalism. Yet it is also reflective of the fact that for liberal interventionism, support for international law and multilateralism is contingent and tactical, rather than based on principle. The liberal interventionist is more comfortable with bypassing what traditional liberal internationalism would regard as the sacrosanct pillars of the international order, even if their first preference is still for seeking solutions that are legal and retain multilateral support.

A final core component of the liberal interventionist philosophy is its reliance on a negative argument. Specifically, liberal interventionism emphasises the costs and consequences of not intervening above and beyond the perceived benefits of military action. Such reasoning is often reflected in abstract declarations such as “inaction is also a choice with consequences,”¹³⁹ but

¹³⁷ Ralph, “Liberal state,” 5-7.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Blair, “Facing Tomorrow.”

it is also a product of the fact that liberal interventionism situates itself within a narrative that begins with a politicised interpretation of the failures of British policy in Rwanda and Bosnia.¹⁴⁰ For a generation of British politicians, these episodes became key reference points in a story about the use and non-use of force in British foreign policy, providing cognitive shortcuts to a more hawkish and interventionist approach via the historical “lessons” that such atrocities must never be permitted to take place again. Liberal internationalism is a much broader tradition of thinking that was primarily concerned with building and maintaining an international order which would prevent conflict between major states. It entailed nothing specific regarding how to respond to conflicts and large scale human rights abuses inside the boundaries of existing states. As Blair argued in his Chicago speech, “the most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts.”¹⁴¹ Liberal interventionism thus emerged within a particular context and for the purpose of responding to a specific problem that its ideological antecedents had not directly addressed.

‘Liberal Conservatism’: A Middle Ground?

Most of the literature on the foreign policy approach of the Coalition government has focused on the notion of “liberal conservatism.”¹⁴² This was the name given by David Cameron to describe his approach, the core tenets of which were first set out during a speech in 2006. Speaking before an American audience, Cameron argued that he was liberal, “because I support the aim of spreading freedom and democracy, and support humanitarian intervention” but conservative “because I recognise the complexities of human nature, and am sceptical of

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Blair, *A Journey*, 229-230; Jamison, “Humanitarian Intervention.”

¹⁴¹ Blair, “Doctrine of International Community.”

¹⁴² Dodds and Elden, “Thinking Ahead,”; Beech, “Traditions and Ideas,”; Oliver Daddow, “Constructing a ‘Great’ Role for Britain in an Age of Austerity: Interpreting Coalition Foreign Policy, 2010-15,” *International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2015): 303-318; Vickers, “Foreign Policy,”; Beech and Munce, “Sceptics or Enthusiasts?,”; Daddow, “Use of Force,”; Ralph, “The Liberal State,”; Honeyman, “From Liberal Interventionism.”

grand schemes to remake the world.’’¹⁴³ He called for more ‘‘patience’’ and ‘‘humility,’’ arguing that democratic change could not be quickly imposed from outside and that military force was not always the most effective instrument in advancing this goal. Cameron enjoyed a close and effective relationship with his Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague,¹⁴⁴ and while the latter was given plenty of freedom to develop his own ideas, he positioned himself in similar terms. In a speech in 2009 on ‘‘the future of British foreign policy’’ for example, Hague identified himself as a ‘‘Liberal Conservative,’’ speaking of the primacy of national interest and the need to be ‘‘realistic’’ in assessing the prospects for democratization on the one hand, while on the other making clear his support for the many interventions that had taken place during the Blair years and arguing that ‘‘to be idle or uninterested while others starve or murder each other in their millions is not for us.’’¹⁴⁵

There was no sign of any significant change to this rhetorical positioning following the formation of the Coalition government in May 2010. In a series of speeches outlining the foreign policy approach of the new government, Hague mixed themes and ideas that can be identified with both the pragmatic conservative tradition and the liberal interventionist approach:

We understand that idealism in foreign policy always needs to be tempered with realism. We have a liberal-conservative outlook that says that change, however desirable, can rarely be imposed on other countries, and that our ability to do so is likely to diminish with time. We know that we have to promote our values with conviction and determination but in ways that are suited to the grain of the other societies we are dealing with, particularly in fragile or post-conflict states. As the Prime Minister has put it, we must be ‘‘hard-headed and practical’’ in the

¹⁴³ David Cameron, ‘‘Speech to the British American Project,’’ 11 September 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5336082.stm

¹⁴⁴ On the relationship between Cameron and Hague, see Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 262-263.

¹⁴⁵ William Hague, ‘‘The Future of British Foreign Policy,’’ 21 July 2009, <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601323>

pursuit of our goals, working to strengthen the international frameworks which can turn rhetoric on human rights into accountability and lasting change.¹⁴⁶

The effort to outline a liberal conservative foreign policy represented the first attempt by a new generation of Conservative leaders to grapple with a key aspect of the Blairite legacy. Prior to the Arab Spring, it is arguable that the presentation of liberal conservatism mattered more than its actual substance. As the above quotations suggest, it was clearly presented as a means of occupying a middle ground between realism and idealism or, alternatively, between the amoral pragmatism of the Major years and the perceived excesses of Blair's hawkish idealism. To the extent that it was clearly equivocal and open to more than one interpretation, it seems quite plausible that this was not coincidental. The middle ground was a politically expedient territory to occupy given the lack of public support for continued military interventionism among the British public.¹⁴⁷

It is debateable whether this middle ground was equidistant between the two traditions outlined previously. Certainly, on the issue of military intervention in particular, the early indications were that Cameron and his fellow Conservatives did not share Blair's appetite for warfighting. Cameron was not simply presenting himself as a less Blairite version of Blair. Instead, he was trying to stake out a distinct ideological territory. For example, in a more intimate discussion of his views in 2009, Cameron sought to illustrate liberal conservatism by contrasting it with the "interventionist" approach of Blair, of which he was critical:

I've always described myself as a liberal Conservative: liberal, because we do support the spread of human rights and democracy around the world, but Conservative because I think before intervening I think you have to demonstrate a practicality and scepticism and ask all the

¹⁴⁶ William Hague, "British Values in a Networked World," 15 September 2010,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-britains-values-in-a-networked-world>

¹⁴⁷ Ben Clements, "Public Opinion and Military Intervention," *The Political Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2013): 119-131; Graeme Davies and Robert Johns. "R2P from Below: Does the British Public View Humanitarian Interventions as Ethical and Effective?" *International Politics* 53, no. 1 (2016): 118-137.

difficult questions about the consequences of your involvement. And I think the problem with Blair was that he was a humanitarian interventionist [sic] without putting any kind of practical brake on these impulses... Blair was just too eager to jump in anywhere.¹⁴⁸

The National Security Strategy (NSS) and the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), which set out the Coalition government's overall strategy for foreign and defence policy, provided a more formal nod in this direction in late 2010. In the former document, there was little mention of the issue, and the strategy suggested Britain would participate only on those occasions "where it is in our interests."¹⁴⁹ The SDSR introduced a real terms defence cut of eight percent, as part of the government's wider program of fiscal retrenchment.¹⁵⁰ This could be read as a further indication that the type of military interventions that were commonly promoted during the New Labour years would be a thing of the past. If the Coalition government can be shown to have pursued a liberal interventionist approach to the crises in Libya and Syria, then this was largely at odds with the promises made by Cameron and Hague. It is also at odds with how Cameron himself sought to characterise Britain's role in the Libyan war. As Chapter Three of this thesis shows in more detail, the Conservative leader resisted the attempts made by others to distil an overarching ideology in his approach, which he identified as that of a "practical, liberal conservative."¹⁵¹

Conclusions

The government's response to the Arab Spring did not take place in an ideological and intellectual vacuum. The themes and ideas discussed here help to illustrate the context in which the Coalition operated and to historicise some of the assumptions and principles that shaped its

¹⁴⁸ Dylan Jones, *Cameron on Cameron; Conversations with Dylan Jones* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 263.

¹⁴⁹ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty; The National Security Strategy*, Cm. 7953, 30.

¹⁵⁰ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948.

¹⁵¹ HC Deb, 15 April 2011, c. 35.

approach. The Coalition was not simply dealing with events as they arose, but was also grappling with the dual legacy of contrasting approaches to British foreign policy and the use of force. This chapter has sought to offer a more robust understanding of ‘‘liberal interventionism’’ than is available in the existing literature, in preparation for the wider themes that are developed in subsequent chapters.

In summary, liberal interventionism is understood not simply as a doctrine, but as an approach to the use of force that is located within a broader world-view or philosophy. While drawing upon a liberal or idealist tradition of foreign policy thinking, this philosophy departs from more traditional liberal approaches in certain respects and emerged in a given historical context. It combines idealism with hawkishness, demonstrating both an ideological optimism and a confidence in the utility of military force to promote its goals. It often prioritises moral or ethical considerations in guiding decisions about the use of force and it adopts a broader and more malleable definition of national interest that is shaped by contemporary understandings of globalization. It enjoys a more ambiguous relationship with international legality and multilateral institutions, which are regarded as central pillars of traditional liberal foreign policy thinking. Finally, it rests on a negative argument about the perceived costs of non-intervention, an argument that is powerfully shaped by a politicised memory of the failures of the international community to respond adequately to slaughter in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Finally, if the principles of historicism are to be adhered to consistently, then this chapter should also provide a warning against straight forward comparisons between the Labour period and the Coalition period. The interpretation of liberal interventionism advanced here recognises the interrelationship between ideas and context. The same must be applied in any attempt to examine the Coalition period and the events described in subsequent chapters. In the aftermath of the War in Iraq, with extant commitments in Afghanistan, and a climate of fiscal retrenchment following the world’s worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, Cameron, Hague and Clegg were operating in a context that was far less conducive to liberal

interventionism. The reputational damage caused by Iraq, the legacy of a war weary public opinion and the precedents established by allowing Parliament to vote on military deployments also meant that Blair had bequeathed to his successors a set of constraints that would make it more difficult for them to follow in his footsteps. All of this makes what follows all the more intriguing.

Chapter Three: Libya: The Decision to Intervene

As discussed in the introductory chapter, academic literature has so far largely bypassed the details surrounding Britain's decision to intervene in the Libyan conflict, preferring instead to use this episode as a vehicle for arguments about the beliefs of policy actors or in the service of advancing a particular conceptual framework.¹⁵² While addressing some of these issues, the primary purpose of this chapter is to fill this empirical gap in the existing literature by explaining how and why Britain came to intervene militarily in the Libyan civil war in March 2011. Without much serious scholarly scrutiny of this episode of British foreign policy, the most detailed explanations have so far been provided by various journalistic "insider" stories.¹⁵³ These accounts emphasise the impetus that came from a hawkish prime minister, who is presented as determined to prevent an Arab "Srebrenica" and who had to overcome significant scepticism within his own government to prevent the fall of Benghazi.

The analysis in this chapter retains the two core features of these narratives, emphasising the importance of the momentum provided by Cameron and the analogies with Bosnia in explaining British policy. However, it places such claims on a stronger evidential footing, by drawing upon a systematic survey of the contemporary documentary record and evidence later submitted by key decision-makers within the government to the FAC's Libya inquiry in 2015. This chapter also challenges the suggestion that Cameron's approach shows evidence of pragmatism and a scepticism of ideology, arguing instead that his forceful advocacy of force is symptomatic of a set of beliefs and assumptions that are consistent with liberal interventionism. Furthermore, the analysis in this chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of analogical reasoning and the nature and extent of scepticism Cameron had to overcome in pushing for intervention, suggesting that the latter is sometimes over-exaggerated in existing

¹⁵² Davidson, "Intervention in Libya"; Daddow and Schnapper, "Liberal Intervention"; Ralph, "The Liberal State."

¹⁵³ Wintour and Watt, "Cameron's Libyan War," and "Swept Aside Sceptics"; Watt, "Cameron On Libya"; D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 159-184; Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron At 10*, 97-114.

accounts. Finally, while these insider stories tend to conflate a month-long process into a single monolithic debate, this chapter shows how policy evolved via a series of stages, with the decisions made at one stage shaping the options available at subsequent points in the crisis. This latter point is reflected in the structure of this chapter, which corresponds to four distinct stages in the response.

The first section briefly describes Britain's initial response to the "Arab Spring." It locates the Libyan crisis and British policy toward it within this wider context. It argues that the impact of the regional unrest on British policy was profound, predisposing policymakers to view events in Libya through an idealistic lens and rendering that country a suitable vehicle for restoring British credibility in a context where it was being challenged. This section briefly describes the first few days of the Libyan unrest, which coincided with the highpoint of the Arab Spring.

British policy during this period struggled to keep pace with events and decision makers had to react to developments with little understanding of what was happening on the ground in Libya.

The second section analyses the turning point in British policy between 21 and 22 February, during which Britain severed its links with the Gaddafi regime and occupied a position of diplomatic leadership at the UN. This diplomatic lead culminated in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1970 on 26 February, which imposed financial restrictions and an arms embargo on the Gaddafi regime and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The importance of these developments, and the central role played by Britain in this international response, is often neglected in the existing accounts of British policy. This section argues that this period in Britain's response to the crisis was important in narrowing the options available in the future and began the process of conflating the goals of humanitarian protection, regime change and democratization. It shows how Britain's diplomatic strategy was premised on a mistaken assumption about the durability of the Gaddafi regime. Contrary to this optimistic expectation of the regime's collapse, Gaddafi promised to retain power at almost any cost, plunging Libya into civil war.

The third section analyses David Cameron's decision to advocate military action in his statement to the House of Commons on 28 February, and the political and diplomatic backlash that resulted from this more forward posture. It shows how Cameron's position was radical, idealistic and demonstrative of a cavalier attitude toward international law, multilateral diplomacy and the practicability of military action. In this regard, it points to the parallels between Cameron's thinking and the liberal interventionism outlined in Chapter 2. This section also shows how the Prime Minister's position further encouraged the conflation of regime change and civilian protection.

The fourth section analyses the strategy Britain adopted in pursuit of a military response, which centred around three key criteria: demonstrable need, regional support and clear legal basis. This section suggests that these criteria, introduced by Foreign Secretary William Hague on 7 March, provided the parameters within which an official consensus could exist. The rapid advance of Gaddafi's forces on the ground, the request from the Arab League for a no-fly zone and the successful acquisition of a legal mandate from the UN on 17 March changed the calculus within the National Security Council. So too did the dramatic change of position from the White House, which helped secure a broader mandate than Britain had originally envisaged and provided US military capabilities without which the action taken may not have been possible. This section therefore argues that the scepticism that Cameron had to overcome must not be overstated, as the changing situation removed many of the grounds for its existence. Furthermore, this section documents the importance of analogical reasoning in British policy, showing how the desire to prevent "another Srebrenica" was not simply a powerful motive for those who, like Cameron, strongly favoured military action. The pervasiveness and moral power of this argument was equally important in persuading those who were initially sceptical about the prospects of intervention.

The concluding section of this chapter summarises two wider points that can be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, it highlights how the "historical lessons" of Iraq lost out to the lessons of Bosnia when combined with the impact of the Arab revolutions. Secondly, it argues that the

beliefs and assumptions that motivated the Prime Minister, while to some extent reflective of the greater constraints observed on the use of force following the experience of Iraq, are in fact much closer to the “liberal interventionism” of the New Labour period than has been recognised until now. Cameron was happy to contemplate military action without UN approval and possibly also without US support. He did so not simply because of a need to protect civilians, but also because of his personal animosity toward Gaddafi and his belief that military force would help spread the seeds of democracy in Libya.

Libya and the Arab Spring

Foreign Secretary William Hague would later herald the Arab revolutions as surpassing 9-11 and the 2008 financial crisis in terms of their long-term implications and as presenting the greatest opportunity for the advancement of human rights and democracy since the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹⁵⁴ Yet the self-immolation of Tunisia street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010, conventionally regarded as the spark that ignited this historical drama, has only taken on its symbolic importance with the benefit of hindsight. It is widely acknowledged that the Arab Spring caught Western governments and their intelligence agencies completely by surprise.¹⁵⁵ As the Chief of Defence staff later recalled of the immediate reaction, “we all went home for Christmas none the wiser.”¹⁵⁶ While the protest movement in Tunisia would force the removal of that country’s pro-Western dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, on 14 January, the uprising in Tunisia was viewed as a localised disturbance in a country where few British interests were at stake.¹⁵⁷ The government’s public statements in response to events in Tunisia – or the absence of them - are indicative of the lack of importance Britain attached to events there. There was no discussion of events in Tunisia in Parliament until after Ben Ali had fled to

¹⁵⁴ Hague, “Continue to Fight.”

¹⁵⁵ This fact is acknowledged in the memoirs of Leon Panetta, who served at the time as Director of the CIA. See Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 303.

¹⁵⁶ Richards, *Taking Command*, 312.

¹⁵⁷ The written evidence from the Foreign Office highlights the low priority given to bilateral relations with the existing regime. See FAC, *British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring*. HC 80, 9 July 2012, Ev. 66-67.

Saudi Arabia and it was not until February that the Foreign Secretary himself updated Parliament on developments in that country, more than two weeks after the government had fallen. Those statements made by the Foreign Office were generally devoid of the optimism and idealism in which the government later presented its response to the Arab revolutions.¹⁵⁸ In fact, the National Security Council (NSC), the newly created nexus of strategic decision-making, did not even discuss the implications of this regional instability until 1 February.¹⁵⁹

Protests in Egypt, a key regional ally and a country with which Britain had much stronger and more valuable links, began to alert the government to the significance of what was soon to become a regional awakening.¹⁶⁰ Hundreds of thousands of unarmed demonstrators, whose initial calls for reform had hardened into demands for Mubarak's resignation following the regime's violence toward demonstrators at the end of January, necessitated the British government defining where it stood. The United States would play the lead role in shaping the Western response to events in Egypt, given the close military relationship between the two countries. We have access to several detailed accounts of decision-making within the US during this crucial period, and all of them suggest the US response was determined almost solely in reference to internal debates and deliberations, with allies such as Britain having no input into this process.¹⁶¹ Within the Obama administration there was a clear ideological divide between realists and idealists, with the latter encouraging a show of solidarity with the forces of democratic change and the former warning against abandoning long-term allies and

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, FCO, "Foreign Secretary Condemns Violence in Tunisia," 11 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-condemns-violence-in-tunisia>; FCO, "Foreign Secretary Urges Rapid Return to Law and Order in Tunisia," 14 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-urges-rapid-return-to-law-and-order-in-tunisia>; FCO, "Foreign Secretary Condemns Violence and Looting in Tunisia," 15 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-condemns-violence-and-looting-in-tunisia>

¹⁵⁹ The dates of these meetings are recorded in FAC, *Arab Spring*, Ev. 88-93. See note 157 above.

¹⁶⁰ For a good account of the importance of these links, see Leech and Gaskarth, "British Foreign Policy."

¹⁶¹ For first-hand accounts of the US response to events in Egypt and the challenges of wider regional unrest, see Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 331-361; Gates, *Duty*, 502-509; Rhodes, *The World As It Is*, Ch. 9; Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 303-304. See also James Mann, *The Obamians; The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (London: Penguin, 2012), 255-280.

encouraging a transformation whose final destination was far from certain. President Obama finally decided to call for Mubarak's departure on 1 February, despite scepticism from members of his own administration, including Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Seldon and Snowdon claim that Cameron was instinctively supportive of the protesters from the outset, but there appears to have been at this stage still some division within the British government as to how to respond.¹⁶² Education Secretary Michael Gove, a known neoconservative, was reportedly in favour of strong shows of support for the protesters.¹⁶³ Other key members of the cabinet, reportedly including Defence Secretary Liam Fox, were more suspicious of the potential dangers inherent in the protest movements. While the divisions do not appear as stark as in the US case, a similar split between realist and idealist perspectives was present. The repeated calls for "orderly transition" betrayed an apparent lack of enthusiasm for events that just a few weeks later would be celebrated as evidence of the march of freedom.¹⁶⁴ The Prime Minister's first serious comments certainly showed greater idealism and ideological fervour than those of his Foreign Secretary. During Prime Minister's Questions Cameron described how, "we cannot watch the scenes in Cairo without finding it incredibly moving – people want to have those aspirations in Egypt, as we have them in our own country."¹⁶⁵ These remarks, however, were only made *after* Obama had publicly called for Mubarak's departure. The British government's initial response appeared equivocal and non-committal. Rather than publicly insist on Mubarak's quitting power, Downing Street stuck to

¹⁶² Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 97-98.

¹⁶³ Wintour and Watt, "Cameron's Libyan War." For divisions in Cameron's government over the wider response to the Arab Spring, *see also* Sam Coates and Roland Watson, "Tories Split as Gove Demands Tougher Line From Hague on Tackling Dictators," *The Times*, 3 March 2011; Nicholas Watt, "Anglo-Arab Relations: Diplomacy: Obama's Open Mind on No-Fly Zone Brings Relief to Cameron," *The Guardian*, 5 March 2011.

¹⁶⁴ *See, for example*, Prime Minister's Office, "Egypt: PM Calls for Orderly Transition to Democratic Government," 31 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/egypt-pm-calls-for-orderly-transition-to-democratic-government>; FCO, "EU Foreign Ministers Discuss Situation in Egypt," 31 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eu-foreign-ministers-discuss-situation-in-egypt>; HC Deb, 01/02/2011, cc. 717-718, 731.

¹⁶⁵ HC Deb, 02/02/2011, c. 852.

the line that it was “not for us to dictate.”¹⁶⁶ The more enthusiastic embrace of democratization did not come until after Mubarak’s belated departure on 11 February presented the British government with a *fait accompli*.

By this stage ministers and officials were grappling with what one Foreign Office official appropriately described as a “lack of bandwidth.”¹⁶⁷ Events in Egypt were quickly followed by the eruption of multiple crises, as an entire regional order appeared to teeter under the weight of popular protests. The contagion effect reached Yemen at the end of January, threatening to further destabilise the region’s most conflict-prone state.¹⁶⁸ The country had long been a major focus of diplomatic attention owing to the growing presence of Al Qaeda on its territory. Mass protests in Bahrain, a country where British interests were clearly implicated, began on 14 February and were followed, just three days later, by unrest in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province.¹⁶⁹ It was in the midst of these developments that the uprising in the eastern half of Libya suddenly erupted. A government which had been in power for less than a year, whose leader had little to no experience of handling major international crises and whose foreign ministry had seen its regional expertise steadily eroded in recent years was ill-equipped to face what was later said to be the busiest time for the Foreign Office since the end of the Cold War.¹⁷⁰ In any case, the safe evacuation of British nationals took priority over developing a coherent political response. In the case of Libya, the difficulties with the evacuation were significant enough to provoke a consular review.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Prime Minister’s Office, “Morning Press Briefing,” 2 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-2-february-2011>

¹⁶⁷ Christopher Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 64.

¹⁶⁸ Nada Bakri and J. David Goodman, “Thousands in Yemen Protest Against the Government,” *The New York Times*, 27 January, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/world/middleeast/28yemen.html>

¹⁶⁹ For details of Britain’s relationship with these two states and its response to the unrest there, see FAC, *The UK’s Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain*, Volume 1. HC 88, 22 November 2013.

¹⁷⁰ This latter claim was made in William Hague, “The Best Diplomatic Service in the World: Strengthening the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as an Institution,” 8 September 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-best-diplomatic-service-in-the-world-strengthening-the-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-as-an-institution>

¹⁷¹ FCO, *Review of Consular Evacuation Procedures*, <http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2011-1114/DEP2011-1114.pdf>

Hague and Cameron were both criticised for their handling of these events. The Foreign Office was depicted as slow and incompetent, while the Prime Minister was accused of failing to provide effective leadership.¹⁷² Criticisms of Cameron as a foreign policy bystander were compounded by his decision to embark on a regional trade tour in the Gulf region, selling arms to dictators at the very same time as Arab populations were mobilising to fight for their freedom.¹⁷³ An awareness of this context should caution against making like-for-like comparisons between Britain's response to events in each country impacted by the unrest. The sequencing of events matters. As the Libyan crisis arrived after events in Tunisia and Egypt it provided an opportunity to salvage the credibility of a Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary under attack on the domestic front and align British policy with the region's prevailing political winds. The lessons drawn from events in Tunisia and Egypt would also determine expectations of what was to come elsewhere.

Above all though, the wider context of the Arab Spring profoundly shaped the ideational context within which the British government debated how to respond to the Libyan crisis. The Prime Minister used his regional tour as an opportunity to belatedly set out his approach, mixing apologies for previous mistakes with bold promises of support for reform and democratization. On 22 February, in a speech before the National Assembly in Kuwait, Cameron set out the key principles underlying the revised regional policy:

For decades, some have argued that stability required highly controlling regimes, and that reform and openness would put that stability at risk. So, the argument went, countries like Britain faced a choice between our interests and our values. And to be honest, we should acknowledge that sometimes we have made such calculations in the past. But I say that is a false choice.

¹⁷² Sam Coates, Anushka Asthana and Michael Savage, "We Are Extremely Sorry, Cameron Tells Britons Stranded in Libya 'Hell,'" *The Times*, 25 February 2011.

¹⁷³ Nicholas Watt and Robert Booth, "David Cameron's Cairo Visit Overshadowed by Defence Tour," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2011.

As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability, rather the reverse. Our interests lie in upholding our values - in insisting on the right to peaceful protest, in freedom of speech and the internet, in freedom of assembly and the rule of law.¹⁷⁴

The Libyan crisis thus coincided with an ideological shift, away from the middle ground claimed by liberal conservatism and in favour of a more liberal and idealist view of the world. This was part of the government's effort to develop what the FCO described as a "coherent narrative" to explain its political response, a process that struggled to keep pace with events.¹⁷⁵ This new approach centred around a revised understanding of "stability," which would henceforward be viewed as contingent upon the development of rule of law, civil society institutions and concrete steps toward democratic governance, in contrast to the cosmetic reforms embarked upon in the 2000s. This formula was at the heart of the government's "Building Stability Overseas Strategy," published in June of that year and based on the argument that the Arab Spring had "challenged long standing notions of stability."¹⁷⁶ It replaced the orthodox, realist understanding of stability with a new definition, presenting democratic institutions not simply as the route to this objective, but as synonymous with stability itself:

The stability we are seeking to support can be defined in terms of political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development open to all.¹⁷⁷

Many of the ideas outlined in Cameron's speech were far from being entirely new. The notion that there was no conflict between Britain's pursuit of its interests and the promotion of its

¹⁷⁴ David Cameron, "Speech to the Kuwaiti National Assembly," 22 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-urges-reform-in-the-middle-east>

¹⁷⁵ FAC, *Arab Spring*, Ev 69.

¹⁷⁶ HM Government, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*, June 2011, 5.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

values was an idea already at the heart of “liberal conservatism,” which claimed to be based on the pursuit of an “enlightened national interest.”¹⁷⁸ The vision Cameron was setting out also incorporated an explicit recognition that these events were driven by endogenous factors and that it was not for outsiders, least of all Western governments, to impose their values or solutions on Arab peoples. Aware of the sensitivities of powerful allies, Cameron insisted that “we in the West have no business trying to impose our particular local model. The evolution of political and economic progress will be different in each country.”¹⁷⁹ This apparent humility was consistent with Cameron’s previous attempt to position himself as a critic of neoconservative ideology and the disaster of Iraq.

Yet if Iraq had dented the appetite for democracy promotion across the Middle East, the overall thrust of Britain’s response was clear evidence that the “Arab Spring” was pulling the pendulum back in the opposite direction. As the above extract from the speech makes clear, Cameron was calling for a fundamental departure in Britain’s policy toward a region of crucial strategic importance and the government continued to characterise its policy as a “values-based approach.”¹⁸⁰ The assumption that the existing rulers were the most dependable bulwark against the prospect of Islamist extremism establishing itself, an argument sometimes known as “Arab exceptionalism” because of its implication that the region was unfit for democracy, was discarded by Cameron as a “prejudice that borders on racism.”¹⁸¹ It is not surprising that contemporary observers would treat these claims with suspicion given the slow response and the impression created by Cameron’s effort to sell arms. In the press conference following the speech referred to above, a journalist captured the prevailing political mood by accusing the Prime Minister of “playing catch up with events.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Hague, “Britain’s Values in a Networked World.”

¹⁷⁹ Cameron, “Speech to Kuwaiti National Assembly.”

¹⁸⁰ FAC, *Arab Spring*, Ev. 62.

¹⁸¹ Cameron, “Speech to Kuwaiti National Assembly.”

¹⁸² Prime Minister’s Office, “Press Conference with Prime Minister of Kuwait,” 22 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/press-conference-with-prime-minister-of-kuwait>

If these suspicions might have been justified at the time, the evidence suggests that after some equivocation in response to the turmoil in Egypt, many inside the British government genuinely came to embrace an idealistic and optimistic narrative surrounding the Arab Spring. The government's rhetoric emphasised the role of values, both in driving the protest movement and shaping the British response.¹⁸³ The defeat of the countervailing forces presented by the existing regimes was seen as inevitable given the "historic" nature of the events taking place. The protesters were perceived as a pan-Arab yearning for universal freedoms driven by a youthful, middle class and secular movement. It became axiomatic to claim that the Western world, with Britain playing a leadership role, should stand in support of such values. This was not a moment to be fearful or cautious, but instead a "moment when history turns the page" as Cameron would subsequently claim.¹⁸⁴ As Ralph, Holland and Zhekova rightly note in their detailed analysis of this narrative, it tended toward the teleological.¹⁸⁵ This view had not fully settled at this early stage and it is analysed in more detailed in Chapter Five. However, its key elements were already coming into focus by the time Gaddafi faced popular protests against his rule a week after the fall of the Mubarak regime, during the zenith of the Arab Spring. It would provide a ready-made story about events in Libya, one that resonated with those whose ideological predisposition leaned more towards a liberal or idealist worldview and was especially comforting in a situation where there was little reliable information about actual events on the ground.

Britain's bilateral relationship with Libya was a curious affair.¹⁸⁶ Following Blair's efforts to resuscitate Gaddafi's international reputation in return for his abandonment of his WMD

¹⁸³ For early examples of this kind of framing and rhetoric, see HC Deb, 02/02/2011, c. 852; HC Deb, 07/02/2011, cc 23-43; HC Deb, 14/02/2011, cc 714-732; Nick Clegg, "Building Open Societies: Transforming Europe's Partnership with North Africa," 1 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/building-open-societies-transforming-europe-s-partnership-with-north-africa>.

¹⁸⁴ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c 28

¹⁸⁵ Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, "Before The Vote," 888.

¹⁸⁶ For relevant background see Christopher Andrew, "British Official Perceptions of Muammar Gaddafi, 1969-2011," in *Scripting Middle East Leaders: The Impact of Leadership Perceptions on US and UK Foreign Policy*, eds. Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 195-212.

programme in 2004, British policy toward Libya had been broadly supportive of the Gaddafi regime. In particular, the Foreign Office had sought to build close links with Gaddafi's son and heir apparent Saif al-Islam, identifying him as a Westernised reformer who might steer the country in a more liberal direction.¹⁸⁷ This policy was continued after the Coalition government was formed in 2010.¹⁸⁸ Privately, however, Cameron was clearly uncomfortable with this strategy of engagement. According to Seldon and Snowdon, he had a "visceral" dislike of Gaddafi and was "repulsed" by Blair's efforts to rehabilitate him.¹⁸⁹ In 2010, the Prime Minister turned down the opportunity to attend a summit hosted by Gaddafi, "because he said he would go nowhere near him."¹⁹⁰ This personal dimension undoubtedly partly accounts for how Cameron could so suddenly emerge as a champion of democratic regime change in Libya, despite Britain's previous policy of engagement and despite his previous warnings that "you cannot drop a fully formed democracy out of an aeroplane at 40,000 feet."¹⁹¹ At the height of the Libyan crisis, Cameron would publicly declare how, "I have *never* supported Colonel Gaddafi or his regime, and I think that his regime is illegitimate."¹⁹²

Libya's descent into chaos began on the night of 15 February, with protests in the eastern city of Benghazi in response to the arrest of two human rights lawyers.¹⁹³ Alongside the contagion effect of wider regional unrest, these protests provided the spark that ignited longstanding grievances. Within a mere five days, much of the eastern half of the country had fallen to what

¹⁸⁷ An overview of this approach is provided by the Foreign Office in its written evidence to the FAC. See FAC, *Arab Spring*, Ev 108.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid; FAC, "Oral Evidence," *Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options*, 1 December 2015, HC 520, Q 148-149.

¹⁸⁹ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 99.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ David Cameron, "Speech to the Conservative Party Conference," 3 October 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7026435.stm>. Cameron had used a similar phrase in his speech to the British American Project the previous year, when he first introduced himself as a "liberal conservative."

¹⁹² HC Deb, 28/02/2011, 36, emphasis added.

¹⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry to Investigate all Alleged Violations of International Human Rights Law in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya*, A/HRC/17/44, 1 June 2011; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya*, A/HRC/19/68, 2 March 2012; Amnesty International, *The Battle for Libya: Killings, Disappearances and Torture* (London: Amnesty International, 2011); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*, Middle East North Africa Report No. 107, June 2011.

quickly became an armed insurrection, aided by significant defections from the military. The conventional wisdom is that this was a national, pro-democratic uprising, with largely unarmed peaceful protesters initially calling for reform. Attacks on police buildings and military bases were attributed to the response of the regime itself, its extreme brutality forcing protesters to take up arms and resort to more “offensive” actions. Regardless of whether this overall framing does justice to the complexity of the uprising, it is clear that both the scale of violence during this initial phase, as well as the speed of escalation, placed Libya in a somewhat separate category to events elsewhere in the region.¹⁹⁴ By 21 February, Libya was on the brink of what would be a complicated and multi-dimensional civil war.

The British government struggled to keep pace with these developments and lacked reliable information about events on the ground. This is hinted toward in the statements released by the Foreign Office, which expressed various levels of “concern” with “reports” that were emerging from Libya, implying that the government did not have its own independent sources of information.¹⁹⁵ A clearer indication that the government’s own sources of intelligence were limited came on 21 February, when Hague wrongly announced that Gaddafi was likely on his way to exile in Venezuela.¹⁹⁶ Media reporting and other open source material was also less reliable and informative than it might otherwise have been, given the regime’s unwillingness to grant access, the frenetic pace of events and the geographical difficulties of reporting in and from Libya.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ For a slightly different interpretation of events see ICG, *Making Sense of Libya*; Hugh Roberts, “Who Said Gaddafi Had to Go?” *London Review of Books* 23, no. 2 (2011): 8-18; Alan Kuperman, “A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO’s Libya Campaign,” *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013): 105-136.

¹⁹⁵ FCO, “Minister for the Middle East Comments on Recent Events in Libya,” 16 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-the-middle-east-comments-on-recent-events-in-libya>; FCO, “British Government Concerned by Reports of Violence in the Middle East,” 19 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-government-concerned-by-reports-of-violence-in-the-middle-east>

¹⁹⁶ Reuters, “Hague: Some Information Gaddafi on Way to Venezuela,” 21 February 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/02/21/uk-libya-venezuela>

¹⁹⁷ Jon Williams, “The Difficulty of Reporting From Inside Libya,” *BBC World News*, 20 February 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/02/reporting_from_libya.html.

Further evidence of the importance of this factor was clear throughout the various submissions of evidence provided to the FAC in 2015. Both Liam Fox, who served as Defence Secretary during this period, and General Richards, who was the Chief of Defence Staff and the government's most senior military adviser, repeatedly emphasised the "fluid" picture they received, the speed at which events moved and the limitations of the intelligence the government possessed.¹⁹⁸ Alan Duncan, who was a junior minister in the Department for International Development (DFID) during this time, argued that the government's Libya expertise had become "very thin" because of the priority given to relations between elites.¹⁹⁹ Only Hague sought to defend the government from the subsequent accusation that it was working with limited intelligence and a flawed understanding of what was happening on the ground. Yet he did so less by contesting the substance of the accusation and more by suggesting that Britain was not alone in its relative state of ignorance:

Remember, these revolutions—Egypt, Tunisia, Libya—were not foreseen, even days before, by the regimes in those countries, with massive intelligence services. They did not understand the militias, the tribes, the movements and what was happening in their own country, so there is not much hope that a foreign intelligence service would have a more profound understanding.²⁰⁰

The very fact that the government lacked reliable information and that key decisions had to be made under intense time pressures made it much easier and more natural to filter events in Libya through the emerging lens of the "Arab Spring" and to view Libya as a suitable candidate for an intervention that would restore Britain's moral credibility. This was especially so for a Prime Minister who long harboured a personal dislike of Colonel Gaddafi.

¹⁹⁸ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 11 December 2015, Q. 153; FAC, "Oral Evidence," *Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options*, HC 520, 19 January 2016, Q. 328, 333, 341.

¹⁹⁹ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q. 388-89.

²⁰⁰ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 11 December 2015, Q. 152. *See also* FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q. 285.

British Policy and UN Resolution 1970

No account of British policy toward Libya would be complete without acknowledging the possible role of the media. This factor likely reinforced the tendency to see the protesters as part of an “Arab Spring,” a tendency which overlooked some of the local complexities of the conflict and exaggerated the brutality on Gaddafi’s side.²⁰¹ Without reporters on the ground, local reports and witness statements were “hard to verify,”²⁰² but often accepted when they coincided with the preconceived narrative. The dominant framing of events pitted unarmed pro-democracy protesters, sometimes including women and children, against the full military might of an insane dictator and his force of “foreign mercenaries.”²⁰³ The high point of media sensationalism came between 20 and 21 February, coinciding with the most violent phase of the uprising when serious unrest was visited on Tripoli for the first time and the next two largest cities effectively fell to opposition forces. On 20 February, witness statements had spoken of women and children jumping off bridges in Benghazi as they sought to escape from “African mercenaries” and there was much talk of “massacres” having taken place.²⁰⁴ On 21 February, news of violent repression in the capital was coupled with widespread allegations of the regime using its air force against unarmed civilian demonstrators. A witness described “warplanes and

²⁰¹ For a critical overview of this reporting see Kuperman, “A Model Intervention?” 107-113, 116-121; Peter Beaumont, “Libya Is Not Helped by this Prism of Propaganda,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/03/libya-prism-propaganda-media-talk-battles>

²⁰² Angelique Chrisafis, “Middle East Unrest: ‘I Can Hear Gunshots, Then I Hear The Voices Screaming’: Libyan Protester Says Fear is Ebbing Away, Despite The Killings,” *The Guardian*, 21 February 2011.

²⁰³ See, for example, Ian Black and Owen Bowcott, “Middle East Unrest: Protesters Report Massacres as Gaddafi Regime Imposes News Blackout,” *The Guardian*, 19 February 2011; Nick Meo, “Gaddafi Sends in Snipers to Silence the Dissent,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, 20 February 2011; Marie Colvin and Matthew Campbell, “Gaddafi’s Vicious Fight for Survival,” *The Sunday Times*, 20 February 2011; Sandra Murphy, “I Fled But My Family Are Still In Danger,” *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2011; Gerri Peev and Tom Kelly, “Bloodbath That Shames Britain,” *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2011; Nabila Ramdani and Vanessa Allen, “300 Libyans Slaughtered,” *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2011; Stephen White, “Massacre On The Street,” *The Daily Mirror*, 21 February 2011; Ian Black, “Libya Defiant as Hundreds Feared Dead: Witnesses Describe ‘Massacres’ as Troops Shoot Unarmed Protesters,” *The Guardian*, 21 February 2011; Catrina Stewart and Kim Sengupta, “Gaddafi Regime: We Will Fight to the End,” *The Independent*, 21 February 2011; Martin Fletcher, “Gaddafi’s Grip on Power Slips Amid Reports That Second City is Falling,” *The Times*, 21 February 2011.

²⁰⁴ Meo, “Gaddafi Sends in Snipers.”

helicopters... indiscriminately bombing one area after another” while others spoke of “mercenary forces opening fire at random on people in the capital.”²⁰⁵ The dramatic defection of Libya’s deputy ambassador to the UN, and his loose talk of “genocide” added to the growing demonization of the regime.²⁰⁶ This bias and sensationalism reinforced the sense of urgency in formulating a response.

The majority of the more extreme claims were in fact untrue, or at least misleading. The casualty figures, while certainly higher than regional equivalents, were slightly at odds with some of the more sensational headlines, and certainly inconsistent with suggestions of “genocide.”²⁰⁷ Concerning the violence in Tripoli, it is still unclear exactly what happened. It has been established that approximately two hundred people were killed in a two-day period between 20th and 21st of February. It is also generally accepted that unrest in the capital involved the burning and destruction of government buildings. As for which of these occurred first, the evidence is inconclusive.²⁰⁸ The US Defense Secretary later confirmed before a Senate committee hearing that the Pentagon had been unable to corroborate any of the reports about the use of air power against civilians.²⁰⁹ Hugh Roberts, who was at the time director of the ICG’s North Africa Project, also found no evidence to support these claims, despite having gone out of his way in search of it.²¹⁰ The first of two lengthy reports by the UN Human Rights Council made reference to media allegations of the air force bombing civilians in Tripoli, but provided no additional supporting evidence.²¹¹ The second, updated report, published in March 2012

²⁰⁵ Richard Spencer, “Gaddafi Bombs His Capital in Last Battle for Survival,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2011.

²⁰⁶ BBC, “Libya’s Deputy Envoy to the UN: ‘What’s Happening Is Genocide,’” BBC News, 21 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12527601>

²⁰⁷ The estimates made at this stage were typically in the region of 200-300 deaths in Benghazi. The overwhelming majority of deaths were adult males, *see* Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Government Attacks in Misrata Kill Civilians,” 10 April 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/10/libya-government-attacks-misrata-kill-civilians>

²⁰⁸ For conflicting accounts *see* Human Rights Council, *International Commission of Inquiry*. A/HRC/17/44, 37-38 and Kuperman, “Model Intervention?” 108-112.

²⁰⁹ US Department of Defense, “News Briefing,” 1 March 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4777>.

²¹⁰ Roberts, “Gaddafi Had To Go?”

²¹¹ *See* Human Rights Council, *Commission of Inquiry*, 24.

simply ignored the allegations entirely and made no reference to any use of air power at all.²¹² The same report found no evidence to support the previously ubiquitous claims about the use of “African mercenaries.”²¹³ Although evidence was uncovered of Gaddafi having imported an organized force of Sudanese fighters, that was not until June and even these fighters were not considered “mercenaries” under international law.²¹⁴ Talk of genocide was also a gross distortion given both the scale of the killings and, more importantly, the absence of any racial motivation behind the regime’s attacks.

It is not possible to quantify precisely the extent to which all of this influenced British policy, but the media undoubtedly played a part in shaping official perceptions of the crisis, encouraging miscalculation and creating political pressure in favour of a strong response. Much of the government’s rhetoric mirrored the framing provided by the media and Cameron’s subsequent advocacy of a no-fly zone was surely encouraged by what were sometimes false reports about the possible use of air power against civilians. According to Jeremy Bowen, the officials he interviewed suggested the media did have an important impact on the development of policy. The veteran BBC reporter writes that, “they were setting the agenda of politicians and officials, putting them under pressure to move fast and keep up.”²¹⁵ The FAC’s Libya inquiry provides clearer evidence of the direct impact of media reporting on the perceptions of policy-makers and the extent to which the government relied on this as a form of “open source” intelligence. Fox recalled “contemporary reports of people throwing themselves off bridges to escape from the forces”²¹⁶ while Duncan described an extract from his diary which read, “tales of mass rape and Gaddafi giving mercenaries Viagra.”²¹⁷ Neither minister was attempting to suggest or imply that such accounts were mistaken or exaggerated. Instead, they

²¹² Human Rights Council, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya*. A/HRC/19/68, 2 March 2012.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 170-72.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

²¹⁵ Jeremy Bowen, *The Arab Uprisings; The People Want the Fall of the Regime* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 141.

²¹⁶ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 1 December 2015, Q. 157

²¹⁷ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 405.

offered these recollections to justify the subsequent resort to force and explain how and why the government ultimately took the view it did.

By 22 February, it was difficult to conceive of how a return to the status quo ante would have been possible, either for Libya itself or for bilateral relations between Britain and the Gaddafi regime. Regardless of faulty intelligence or media misreporting, this much would have been fairly clear. After less than a week of unrest, Gaddafi now faced an armed insurrection in Cyrenaica, with the next three largest cities outside of Tripoli under rebel control, in addition to violent unrest in the capital itself. In order for Gaddafi to maintain himself in power, he would have to fight a civil war. In this context, Britain stepped up the level of diplomatic condemnation and sought to forge a consensus in favour of strong action against the regime, culminating in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1970 on 26 February imposing sanctions and the threat of judicial action against senior regime personnel.²¹⁸ The sudden adoption of a much stronger position and the decision to take diplomatic leadership in pushing for action was premised on the growing assumption that the demise of the regime was now desirable, necessary and inevitable. These diplomatic manoeuvres helped pave the way for the subsequent military response and it was during this period, approximately between 24 and 28 February, that the Prime Minister and key advisers around him first began privately contemplating the possibility of military action.

21 February saw a qualitative change in Britain's diplomatic condemnation of the violence. Speaking before a meeting of EU foreign ministers, Hague warned the Libyan regime that "the world was watching" and declared the situation there "deplorable and unacceptable."²¹⁹ More important were calls for "accountability" for the deaths and abuses that were taking place.

Gaddafi made his first public appearance following the beginning of the uprising the next day, defying Hague's claims about his pending departure to Venezuela and declaring his intention to

²¹⁸ UN Security Council. Resolution 1970, S/Res/1970, 26 February 2011.

²¹⁹ FCO, "Foreign Secretary Describes Situation in Libya as 'Deplorable and Unacceptable,'" 21 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-describes-situation-in-libya-as-deplorable-and-unacceptable>

fight to the end in defiant fashion.²²⁰ On 23 February his forces began efforts to retake Zawiyah, arguably marking the point at which the civil war began in earnest.²²¹ Existing accounts have spoken of the impact of Gaddafi's speech on both Cameron and Ed Llewellyn, his Chief of Staff and a leading adviser on foreign policy.²²² According to D'Ancona, Llewellyn, "regarded this speech as a turning point and told his boss so."²²³ The FAC's Libya inquiry provides further evidence of the importance of this speech. According to Fox, it was following this speech that the government began assessing various options and planning ahead and the former Defence Secretary quoted Gaddafi's threatening rhetoric in an effort to recreate the dilemma that confronted policy-makers at the time.²²⁴

The extent of Britain's diplomatic activity and the hardening of the government's position was not fully clear at the time, most likely because of the need to avoid increasing the risk to British nationals still stranded in Libya, whose safety was a growing concern. Sources in the Foreign Office indicated that the government was ready to "push all the buttons" as soon as they were safe.²²⁵ The existing accounts of British policy tend to neglect this crucial phase, glossing over the importance of Resolution 1970 and failing to discuss the role of Hague and the Foreign Office in the British response. Seldon and Snowdon merely note in passing that a resolution was secured, without discussion of its implications or Britain's role in it.²²⁶ D'Ancona does not mention this resolution at all.²²⁷ Such neglect is a mistake. This diplomatic development was a tangible escalation in the response of the international community, an important stepping-stone on the way to the second resolution which authorised military action and a development in which Britain, alongside France, played the dominant role. The decisions made in this period also altered the strategic calculus, by isolating Gaddafi to the greatest extent and pushing for the

²²⁰ BBC, "Libya Protests: Defiant Gaddafi Refuses to Quit," BBC News, 22 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12544624>

²²¹ Human Rights Council, *Commission of Inquiry*, 147-148.

²²² D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 166; Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 269-70.

²²³ D'Ancona, *ibid*, 164.

²²⁴ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 1 December 2015, Q. 150, 157.

²²⁵ Coates, Asthana and Savage, "We Are Extremely Sorry," 25 February 2011.

²²⁶ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 100.

²²⁷ D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 159-184.

strongest possible resolution, Britain narrowed the future options. While there is not a wealth of primary source material for assessing this week-long period, this gap can be partially filled by secondary sources.²²⁸ Research by Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, which involved interviews with diplomats and officials, helps reconstruct events behind the scenes at New York during the build up to the first resolution.²²⁹

On the 22 February the UN Security Council issued a Presidential Statement in response to the situation. While the statement called for “national dialogue,” it also invoked Libya’s “responsibility to protect its population” and “underscored the need to hold to account those responsible for attack.”²³⁰ The British delegation had played a leading part in crafting the statement and following its release immediately went to work to push for a Security Council resolution. British and French diplomats worked closely together during this period, encouraging other members of the international community in a more hawkish direction. French President Nicolas Sarkozy saw Libya as an opportunity to demonstrate his support for democracy and the Arab Spring, an opportunity even more pressing given his government’s closeness to the Tunisian regime of Ben Ali.²³¹ Sarkozy therefore became the first international leader to call for Gaddafi to leave power on 25 February, a step both Obama and Cameron reserved until after the passage of the first UN Resolution.²³² Britain and France occupied the leadership position in New York, with Britain imposing itself as “penholder,” the country responsible for drafting resolutions and suggesting courses of action.²³³ The British government

²²⁸ Parliament did not meet between 17 and 28 February.

²²⁹ Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, “Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2014): 899-911. See also the testimony of Britain’s UN ambassador, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, to the Defence Committee in 2012. Defence Committee. *Operations in Libya*, HC 950, 8 February 2012, Ev. 14-23.

²³⁰ UN Security Council, “Presidential Statement on Libya,” SC/10180-AFR/2120, 22 February 2011.

²³¹ For useful overviews of French policy during this period see Rachel Utley, “France and the Arab Upheavals: Beyond Sarkozy,” *The RUSI Journal*, 158(2), 68-79; Laura-Theresa Kruger and Bernhard Stahl, “The French Foreign Policy U-turn in the Arab Spring – The Case of Tunisia,” *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 197-222.

²³² “Libya: Nicolas Sarkozy Calls for Col Gaddafi to Step Down,” *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8348009/Libya-Nicolas-Sarkozy-calls-for-Col-Gaddafi-to-step-down.html>

²³³ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, “Power in Practice,” 898.

also seized the initiative at the UN Human Rights Council, helping establish a commission of inquiry and putting in motion the necessary measures to secure Libya's removal.²³⁴

The outcome of this Anglo-Franco concert was UNSC Resolution 1970, which passed by unanimous vote on 26 February.²³⁵ Acting under Chapter VII, Article 41 of the Charter, the Security Council called for an immediate end to the violence and imposed a series of measures against the Libyan government. These measures included an arms embargo, travel bans and assets freezes for members of the Gaddafi family and senior regime figures, and referred the situation to the ICC. This latter measure was significant, representing the first time the Council had unanimously referred a sitting ruler to the court, a fact widely celebrated by advocates of R2P.²³⁶ The text was largely a British draft, with other members having made only minor revisions. Britain and France had secured the inclusion of the ICC referral despite scepticism from the majority of Council members, including the United States. As an unnamed British diplomat involved in the process revealed to Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, the strategy was to “throw everything into 1970,” pushing for the toughest possible response.²³⁷ Given the speed with which the Council was forced to react to the Libyan crisis, and given the unanimous backing of its members, this was an unusually strong reaction.

The determination to “throw everything into 1970” amounted to a policy of regime change. From 22 February onwards, and possibly as early as 21 February, British policy was based on the *de facto* assumption that Gaddafi's removal from power was desirable, necessary and inevitable. Whether any formal or explicit decisions were made, senior figures in the British government simply took it for granted either that the regime must fall, that such an outcome was highly desirable, or both. The assumption reflected both what the majority within government believed was likely to happen and what they believed *ought* to happen. British

²³⁴ FCO, “UK at the UN Human Rights Council on Libya: ‘We Are And Will Continue to Take Action,’” 25 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-at-the-un-human-rights-council-on-libya-we-are-and-will-continue-to-take-action>

²³⁵ UNSC Resolution 1970.

²³⁶ Bellamy and Williams, “New Politics of Protection?”; Dunne and Gifkins, “State of Intervention.”

²³⁷ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, “Power in Practice,” 898.

policy would contribute to this outcome by taking diplomatic measures to speed up the process. This rationale was made clear from Cameron's statement to Parliament on 28 February, when the Prime Minister argued "we must do everything we can to isolate it. We must cut off money, cut off supply and cut off oxygen from the regime, so that it falls as fast as it possibly can."²³⁸

The measures included in 1970 were part of this approach. The *Guardian's* report on Britain's Libya intervention, which is based on interviews with senior ministers involved in the decisions, claims that Britain's diplomatic activity was initially based on the Foreign Office's belief that a "classic sanctions resolution" would be "sufficient."²³⁹ While not explicit, the context strongly suggests this meant "sufficient" for the purpose of bringing down the regime. Bowen's account, which is also based on sources inside the British government, reveals that Arminka Helic, a foreign policy adviser to Hague, was a key advocate of the ICC referral. Helic apparently believed that Gaddafi was already finished but that this measure would help "peel off those around him."²⁴⁰ Furthermore, unless we hypothesise that British policy was already in the business of regime change before the passage of Resolution 1970, then the measures included in that resolution make little sense. As one diplomat involved in the negotiations in New York explained, raising the bar so high with the first resolution "limited the options available in future" because any subsequent resolution would need to "up the ante."²⁴¹ The only danger in pushing this interpretation too far is that it gives the appearance of a conscious, calculated strategy when the reality was likely more complicated. As one official recalled of this period, "we were responding, not strategizing."²⁴²

It is not clear whether 1970 was treated as a precursor to a possible intervention, but it was during this period that the Prime Minister shifted toward considering a military response.

D'Ancona writes that, "behind the scenes, Cameron was increasingly convinced that at least

²³⁸ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c. 36.

²³⁹ Wintour and Watt, "Cameron's Libyan War."

²⁴⁰ Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 139.

²⁴¹ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, "Power in Practice," 900.

²⁴² Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 140.

the threat of a no-fly zone would be needed and probably its imposition.’’²⁴³ It is not explicit exactly when this shift in Cameron’s thinking occurred, but the narrative suggests it was around the time of Gaddafi’s speech on the 22 February and his security forces’ brutal effort to retake Zawiyah the following day. However, at this stage, Cameron was still preoccupied by his regional trip and the safety of British nationals.²⁴⁴ While most accounts of Britain’s decision to intervene are right to stress that the impetus came directly from Number 10, it is unclear whether the prior impetus in favour of a stronger diplomatic position, which logically preceded the consideration of military measures, originated with the Foreign Office or Cameron himself. The processes by which any formal decisions were made during this period also remains unclear.²⁴⁵ The NSC did not meet until Cameron’s return from the Gulf on 25 February.²⁴⁶ It met again on 28 February, the morning before Cameron effectively advocated military action in the Commons. D’Ancona writes that ‘‘in the National Security Council, Cameron put to the meeting the pivotal question: ‘‘Is it in our national interest or not to get involved?’’ As far as the PM was concerned, the question answered itself.’’²⁴⁷ It is unclear whether he is referring to the meeting on the 25th before even the passage of the first resolution, or the 28th, following Obama’s public call for Gaddafi’s departure. Either way, if D’Ancona’s account is accurate, the Prime Minister had effectively made up his mind at this early stage. Cabinet did not even discuss the possibility of military action until 1 March.²⁴⁸

While existing accounts of British policy almost certainly overstate the level of internal opposition and scepticism faced by the Prime Minister, it is true that at this point in the debate, many were sceptical. According to the *Guardian’s* investigation, MI6 chief John Sawers

²⁴³ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 165.

²⁴⁴ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 98-100.

²⁴⁵ For a critical account of British decision-making processes, see Michael Clarke, ‘‘The Making of Britain’s Libya Strategy,’’ in *Short War, Long Shadow; The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libyan Campaign*, eds. Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen (London: Royal United Services Institute), 7-14.

²⁴⁶ FAC, *Arab Spring*, Ev. 103.

²⁴⁷ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 165.

²⁴⁸ Coates and Watson, ‘‘Tories Split.’’

believed it was “better the devil you know,” indicating his fear of what might happen if the Gaddafi regime were to collapse.²⁴⁹ General David Richards served as the Chief of Defence Staff during the period examined in this research. As the government’s most senior military adviser, he was also a regular participant in NSC meetings. He is significant for being the only participant to have so far published his memoirs.²⁵⁰ In both Libya and Syria, his thinking often provided a juxtaposition with the Prime Minister, who described the general as a “big state man.”²⁵¹ This was a shorthand way of describing Richards as more traditional and realist in his approach and these instincts would often place him at odds with the politicians. Richards was primarily focused on the evacuation effort at this time, but it is clear from his later testimony to the FAC and his memoirs that he was sceptical about the politicians’ enthusiasm for military action.²⁵² Fox also describes a “careful reticence” about potential involvement, recalling that “it would be fair to say that the military, as is very often the case, did not want to be drawn into a conflict unnecessarily. Certainly for my own part, I was keen that we would not see military operations unless required.”²⁵³ Contemporary reports also suggest both Hague and Clegg were somewhat sceptical, at least at this early stage.²⁵⁴ If Cameron had already decided that some form of military intervention were all but inevitable unless Gaddafi backed down, then he was clearly further along in his thinking than the majority of the NSC. It is more likely, given the divisions described above, that other members of the government were consenting to what they regarded as contingency planning.

Cameron Advocates Intervention

The passage of Resolution 1970 was quickly followed by widespread calls for Gaddafi to quit power. Obama made the first such call on the day the resolution passed and Cameron quickly followed, claiming the measures contained in the resolution were sending a “very clear

²⁴⁹ Wintour and Watt, “Swept Aside Sceptics.”

²⁵⁰ Richards, *Taking Command*.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, PAGE

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 311-313; FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 327-328, 339.

²⁵³ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 1 December 2015, Q. 151.

²⁵⁴ Coates and Watson, “Tories Split.”

message to this regime. It's time for Colonel Gaddafi to go and to go now.’’²⁵⁵ The following day Cameron set out his position in greater detail before Parliament, with the majority of British nationals safely evacuated. This statement marked a clear escalation in Britain's response. The Prime Minister reiterated the position on Gaddafi, telling Parliament that ‘‘we should be clear that for the future of Libya and its people, Colonel Gaddafi's regime must end and he must leave.’’²⁵⁶ The various measures that had been enacted were justified in accordance with this objective and Cameron proudly claimed that ‘‘with respect to all of those actions, Britain is taking a lead.’’²⁵⁷

Unlike his American counterpart, Cameron went further than open advocacy of regime change by announcing plans for possible military action and lending his approval to the prospect of arming the opposition.²⁵⁸ Declaring that ‘‘we do not in any way rule out the use of military assets,’’ Cameron announced he had asked military chiefs to begin drawing up plans for a no-fly zone, appealing to the growing sentiment that it would be unconscionable to stand aside in the event of Gaddafi using force against his own people.²⁵⁹ In the days ahead, the government would later claim that this was simply a call for contingency planning. In an exchange with the interventionist Labour MP Mike Gapes, Cameron did suggest that, ‘‘we need to do the preparation and planning now, because no one can be sure what Colonel Gaddafi will do to his own people.’’²⁶⁰ The Defence Secretary reinforced this point when speaking on the Andrew Marr Show the following week, arguing that ‘‘the important thing is that we get the work done before we have to get to that point, and had it not been for the Prime Minister pushing the issue I rather fear that we would be behind the curve.’’²⁶¹ As noted in the preceding section, given the

²⁵⁵ Prime Minister's Office, ‘‘PM Urges Colonel Qadhafi to ‘Go Now,’’’ 27 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-urges-colonel-qadhafi-to-go-now>

²⁵⁶ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c. 24.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Obama too had sanctioned ‘‘contingency’’ planning but in this instance such a move was not indicative that the President was suddenly shifting in favour of intervention. The US position is discussed in more detail in the following section.

²⁵⁹ HC Deb 28/02/2011, c. 25.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, c 31.

²⁶¹ MOD, ‘‘Libya Update,’’ 7 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-on-libya>. See also Prime Minister's Office, ‘‘Morning Press Briefing,’’ 1 March 2011,

differing views within the NSC, the instruction to draw up plans would not have been understood as an automatic endorsement of intervention.

However, to characterise all of this as nothing more than a prudent call for contingency planning would be at odds with both the tone and the substance of the remarks the Prime Minister had made in Parliament. When Cameron first announced he had asked military chiefs to draw up plans for a no-fly zone, he argued that “we must not tolerate this regime using force against its own people.”²⁶² When asked by one MP if the world would be able to stand by in the event of Gaddafi fighting back, the reply was unequivocal: “I agree that we should not just stand by – if Colonel Gaddafi uses military force against his own people, the world cannot stand by.”²⁶³ Such comments suggested more than contingency planning. They suggested that, as far as Cameron was concerned, military force would be inevitable if Gaddafi did not back down. Certainly, this was the interpretation that was adopted by British politicians, the media and key allies.²⁶⁴ Cameron was not just exploring the possibility of the military option, he was *advocating* it.

While the above quotations suggest the need to protect civilians was the primary motivation behind the consideration of military action, Cameron’s statement continued the tendency to conflate this goal with the strong desire to replace the Gaddafi regime. In fact, his comments placed more emphasis on the regime change objective than on the need for civilian protection. It was on the basis of bringing down the regime that Cameron responded positively to the idea that Britain might provide arms to Gaddafi’s opponents, replying to the suggestion by saying that given the importance of ensuring the dictator’s removal from power, “if helping the opposition in Libya would help bring that about, it is certainly something we should

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-1-march-2011>; Prime Minister’s Office, “Morning Press Briefing,” 3 March 2011,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-3-march-2011>

²⁶² HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c. 25.

²⁶³ Ibid, c. 40.

²⁶⁴ Deborah Haynes, Billy Kenber and Sam Coates, “Britain’s Threadbare Defences Exposed,” *The Times*, 2 March 2011.

consider.’²⁶⁵ This was profoundly at odds with Cameron’s later efforts to characterise himself as “practical” in his approach. Not only did Britain know relatively little about who the opposition were but providing arms to them would violate the very UN resolution British diplomacy had just brought about.²⁶⁶

Many of the existing explanations of Cameron’s motivation have emphasised the need to prevent a major civilian massacre in Benghazi, akin to the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, as the central driver of government decision-making.²⁶⁷ The role of this historical analogy in the government’s decision was indeed powerful and is analysed in more detail in the following section. However, as Davidson has already pointed out, Cameron’s call for military action predated the emergence of the threat to Benghazi.²⁶⁸ While Gaddafi’s forces were continuing their onslaught on Zawiyah in the west, they did not begin their counter-offensive to retake the cities in the eastern region until the following week and the rapid success they achieved on the ground was not widely anticipated at the time. Even when the regime’s forces did begin retaking towns and cities that had fallen to the opposition, this recapturing of territory was not accompanied by any large-scale massacres, even if disproportionate force and brutal repression was the norm.²⁶⁹ To say that Cameron anticipated widespread threat to civilian life and the potential for a massacre is one thing, to say that his advocacy of force was a straightforward reaction to the threat to Benghazi or the vague possibility of an “Arab Srebrenica” is too simplistic. A supplementary explanation might highlight the political pressure Cameron had been facing. Cameron’s statement before Parliament was being billed as a “defining moment of his premiership.”²⁷⁰ It was delivered at a time where both Cameron and his government were being roundly criticised for their response to the Arab Spring, as describing previously. A

²⁶⁵ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c. 35.

²⁶⁶ The clearest recognition of this fact was provided by Hague on 17 March. *See* HC Deb, 17/03/2011, cc. 507-508.

²⁶⁷ Wintour and Watt, “Cameron’s Libyan War,”; D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 166; Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 101.

²⁶⁸ Davidson, “Intervention in Libya,” 315.

²⁶⁹ Kuperman, “Model Intervention?” 112.

²⁷⁰ Matthew D’Ancona, “Cameron’s True Character Will Be Revealed on the World Stage,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, 27 February 2011.

strong and decisive stand against Gaddafi could counter suggestions that Cameron was a weak leader or that Britain's foreign policy was moral suspect.

Cameron's wider views about Britain's identity as an international actor are also a potentially relevant part of the equation in any attempt to understand his psychology and motivation. His public speeches and statements on foreign policy, assuming they are in any way representative of his private thinking, reveal a man who is deeply patriotic and painfully wedded to anachronistic visions of British leadership. Cameron believed that Britain should "punch above our weight in the world," notwithstanding his government's decision to reduce defence expenditure, because "it is part of who we are."²⁷¹ He was fond of quoting Gladstone's maxim that "the foreign policy of England should be inspired by the love of freedom"²⁷² and he liked to speak of values and instincts that "are part of our DNA."²⁷³ This was reinforced by a narrative which celebrated Britain's role in world history and relived key episodes as evidence of British leadership and moral purpose. Such episodes were not seen as belonging to a distant past, but instead presented as revealing traits that are assumed to be intrinsic and can be summoned in the face of present challenges. In his first speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet, Cameron concluded his vision by pointing out that "we have the values - national values that swept slavery from the seas, that stood up to both fascism and communism and that helped to spread democracy and human rights around the planet - that will drive us to do good around the world."²⁷⁴ The threat to this identity and the psychological comfort it provides is the notion of decline and the Prime Minister clearly saw it as his duty to "confront the pessimism that says we can't make a difference."²⁷⁵ These beliefs do not automatically translate into a reflexive appetite to intervene militarily when faced with dilemmas of the kind that Libya presented. Yet

²⁷¹ Prime Minister's Office, "Transcript of the PM's Al Jazeera Interview with Sir David Frost," 9 September, 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-of-the-pms-al-jazeera-interview-with-sir-david-frost>

²⁷² D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 165.

²⁷³ David Cameron, "Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet," 15 November 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-to-lord-mayors-banquet>

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ David Cameron, "Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet," 14 November 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-at-the-lord-mayors-banquet>

when we combine this specific conception of Britain's identity as an international actor with the context of the Arab Spring we can see how a desire to confront Gaddafi decisively would have had an intuitive appeal. In this context, Cameron's statement in the House on 28 February can be understood, in part, as a bid for international leadership and an exercise in identity reinforcement.

Above all though, Cameron's greater willingness to consider using force in these circumstances, and his open advocacy of this possibility at a stage when there was less appetite for it both domestically and internationally, places him much closer to the liberal interventionist camp than he would be willing to openly concede. Instinctively, Cameron felt the dangers of allowing Gaddafi to prevail outweighed the many risks of intervening. As D'Ancona rightly observes, the Libyan intervention showed Cameron was not a risk-averse pragmatist. As someone close to him during the conflict observed, "he is actually a gambler, it goes back to the side of him that loves playing bridge and all that."²⁷⁶ The tone of Cameron's remarks was often fiery and zealous. He proudly announced that, "I have never supported Colonel Gaddafi or his regime, and I think that his regime is illegitimate" before adding "we must do everything that we can to isolate it. We must cut off money, cut off supply and cut off oxygen from the regime, so that it falls as fast as it possibly can."²⁷⁷

As is typical of liberal interventionist thinking, Cameron's position was also premised on an over-estimation of the utility and efficacy of the military option, despite paying lip service to the fact that a no-fly zone would not necessarily solve the problem. In one exchange, Cameron recognised that a no-fly zone was "not without its difficulties and problems" and that "it would not necessarily stop all oppression of the Libyan people..."²⁷⁸ Despite this, Richards writes in his memoirs how he was worried a no-fly zone would make little practical difference, but "had a hell of a time" trying to convince his political master of this fact.²⁷⁹ Similarly, a

²⁷⁶ D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 183.

²⁷⁷ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c 36.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Richards, *Taking Command*, 314.

Whitehall official later recalled remarking at the time, “what is this going to do? The critical things would happen on the ground. There would be slaughter on the ground.”²⁸⁰ Furthermore, it is worth observing that there was at this stage no support within the UN for a no-fly zone, nor from within the MENA region. It appears that for Cameron, considerations of practicability, legality and multilateral support, while not dismissed completely, fell behind the symbolic appeal of a strong and confrontational position.

The tendency to conflate regime change and civilian protection has already been noted. It is also worth observing that Cameron was not simply positioning himself as the protector of civilian life, but as the champion of democratization and universal values. The first section of this chapter emphasised the importance of the government’s framing of the Arab Spring and Cameron was clearly swept up in the idealism surrounding these events, telling parliamentarians that, “what is *exciting* is that everybody thought that this murderous dictator was fully in control of his country, but part of his country has been knocked over so quickly.”²⁸¹ These were not simply Libyan *civilians*, but civilians who were standing against a typical pantomime villain in the form of Colonel Gaddafi and who were fighting, Cameron believed, “for greater democracy and greater freedom, such as we take for granted in this country.”²⁸² They thus became worthy of protection in a way other victims of repression are not. Cameron was driven by the Srebrenica argument, but he was also moved by a desire to use this opportunity to rid the world of a dictator and help spread democracy in the Middle East. The Prime Minister had previously spoken on many occasions about the mistakes of Iraq, but he made clear, in the context of the contemporary changes sweeping the Arab world, that the promotion of democracy “is almost always and everywhere a good thing to do.”²⁸³ Despite his previous rhetoric about the need for patience and humility, British military force was beginning to be seen as a means by which Britain could decisively contribute to this goal.

²⁸⁰ Wintour and Watt, “Cameron’s Libyan War.”

²⁸¹ HC Deb, 28/02/2011, c. 41, emphasis added.

²⁸² HC Deb, 16/03/2011, c. 291.

²⁸³ HC Deb, 03/05/2011, c. 467.

The Three Criteria and UN Resolution 1973

If Cameron was retrospectively praised for adopting a strong stance early on, he initially appeared to face diplomatic isolation. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates immediately played down the prospects of military action, warning Congress about the difficulties and dangers of a no-fly zone.²⁸⁴ Although it subsequently became clear that Gates was speaking for himself, the US position remained ambiguous and non-committal despite Obama having called for Gaddafi's departure. Officials in the US Embassy in London were apparently "baffled" by Cameron's remarks and resorted to telephoning backbench MPs for guidance on how best to interpret the speech.²⁸⁵ As noted, there was at this stage no regional call for intervention, nor much prospect of approval in either the EU or the UN. When cabinet discussed the possibility of military action for the first time on 1 March, there was a leaked report of a split between "idealists and pragmatists."²⁸⁶ These difficulties were compounded when a covert mission to make contact with opposition forces ended in fiasco.²⁸⁷ Rebel fighters detained the British team near Benghazi, and a phone call from the former British ambassador, during which he pleaded for his compatriots' release, was leaked by the Gaddafi regime.²⁸⁸ The government therefore faced a fresh round of criticism in both the press and Parliament.²⁸⁹

Yet this fiasco was quickly followed by the introduction of a much clearer approach. In place of the Prime Minister's inconsistent hawkishness and the reports of internal divisions, Hague introduced three criteria that would shape Britain's response to the crisis and any decisions surrounding the possible use of force. These were outlined in Parliament for the first time on 7

²⁸⁴ Gates, *Duty*, 512-513.

²⁸⁵ Haynes, Kenber and Coates, "Britain's Threadbare Defences."

²⁸⁶ Coates and Watson, "Tories Split."

²⁸⁷ Rory Cormac and Oliver Daddow, "Covert Action Failure and Fiasco Construction: William Hague's 2011 Libyan Venture," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 5 (2017) 1-18.

²⁸⁸ BBC, "Libya Unrest: UK Diplomatic Team Released by Rebels," BBC News, 6 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12660163>

²⁸⁹ James Blitz and Geoffrey Parker, "Cameron's Lead on Libya Sows Confusion," *The Financial Times*, 3 March 2011.

March.²⁹⁰ The first criterion was “regional support.”²⁹¹ This necessitated both the diplomatic support of key regional actors and an explicit request from rebel forces themselves. Secondly, any military action would require a “clear trigger” or “demonstrable need.”²⁹² This was taken to refer to circumstances in which widespread loss of life was widely anticipated and the case for action of some kind was therefore less open to question. Thirdly, any military action would require an “appropriate” or “clear legal basis.”²⁹³ A UN Security Council resolution was naturally seen as the preferred route, but ministers were sufficiently non-committal so as to leave open the opportunity for alternative, more controversial, legal bases.

The introduction of these criteria was significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, they provided the basis for British diplomatic leadership, shaping discussions and deliberations within NATO in the build up to intervention.²⁹⁴ Secondly, they provided an effective rhetorical strategy, allowing ministers to coalesce around a pre-formulated set of answers to difficult questions in the days ahead.²⁹⁵ Thirdly, they suggest that while existing accounts are correct to highlight the impetus that came from Number 10, they have neglected the role of Hague and the Foreign Office in the development of British policy. It was Hague who first introduced these criteria publicly, and while NATO representatives referred to them as the “Leslie criteria” after their introduction by Britain’s Permanent Representative Mariot Leslie on 8 March, Leslie herself later suggested that Hague was the originator of this approach.²⁹⁶ Fourthly, it might be argued that these criteria permitted boundaries within which an official consensus could exist. The

²⁹⁰ HC Deb, 07/03/2011, c. 644, 649. For reassertions of these criteria in the days ahead, see FCO, “EU Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Libya,” 10 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eu-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-libya>; MOD, “Dr Fox Discusses Libya No-Fly Zone Possibility,” 10 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dr-fox-discusses-libya-no-fly-zone-possibility>; Prime Minister’s Office, “Letter from PM and President Sarkozy to President Van Rompuy,” 10 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/letter-from-the-pm-and-president-sarkozy-to-president-van-rompuy>; HC Deb, 14/03/2011, c. 27, c. 40.

²⁹¹ HC Deb, 07/03/2011, c 644.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, “Power in Practice,” 904-905.

²⁹⁵ See, for example, HC Deb, 14/03/2011, c. 3; Ibid., c. 40

²⁹⁶ See Leslie’s testimony, Defence Committee, *Operations In Libya*, Ev. 25.

notion that Cameron “swept aside sceptics” is too simplistic.²⁹⁷ The three criteria represented the incorporation of scepticism into the government’s strategy.

Securing regional support was the priority objective of the British government during the first week of March. The greater emphasis on regional support was a necessary tactic in the aftermath of Iraq. Cameron expressed the government’s calculation in the following terms, suggesting that, “it seems to me that we have to learn both the lessons of Iraq, by proceeding with the maximum Arab support and being very clear that there will be no army of occupation, and the lessons of Bosnia and not stand aside and witness a slaughter.”²⁹⁸ Despite the botched covert intervention, the Foreign Office had already established tentative contacts with the opposition by 2 March.²⁹⁹ By the time Hague outlined the three criteria on 7 March, the rebel leadership had already explicitly requested a no-fly zone.³⁰⁰ Gaddafi’s forces began a concerted counter-attack beginning on 6 March and rebel groups struggled to hold the territories they had previously occupied. Initially sceptical of any outside involvement, they were now realising that the survival of their revolution could depend on powerful outside backers.³⁰¹

Unlikely circumstances prompted Arab states to abandon their traditional hostility to the notion of humanitarian intervention. Key to explaining such an outcome is the fact that Gaddafi held the unique status of having almost no friends he could rely on. While he could count on some support from African states, his arrogance and eccentricity had ensured he was almost universally detested across the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia, a strong voice within the Arab League, especially hostile.³⁰² His removal from power would be entirely welcome to most of

²⁹⁷ Wintour and Watt, “Swept Aside Sceptics.”

²⁹⁸ HC Deb, 18/03/2011, c. 629.

²⁹⁹ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Speaks to General Abdul Fattah Younis al Obidi,” 2 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-speaks-to-general-abdul-fattah-younis-al-obidi>

³⁰⁰ HC Deb, 07/03/2011, c. 649.

³⁰¹ For a good summary of developments, see Anthony Bell and David Witter, *The Libyan Revolution Part 1: The Roots of Rebellion* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), 25-27, 30-34; and Anthony Bell and David Witter, *The Libyan Revolution Part 3: Stalemate and Siege* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), 17-19.

³⁰² Gaddafi had publicly insulted the Saudi king at a summit in 2009. See Adel Darwish, “Muammar Gaddafi Accuses Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah of Lying at Arab summit,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 30

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which first called for a no-fly zone on 8 March. Although North African countries were more fearful of the risks of a power vacuum being created by his removal, Gaddafi had made enemies on that continent too and many leaders were in any case accepting of the argument that the current crisis made his continuity in power all but impossible.³⁰³

The Arab Spring was also responsible for a shift in the foreign policy of Qatar which, unlike most of its neighbours, saw the unrest not as a threat but an opportunity.³⁰⁴ The Qatari PM, colloquially referred to in diplomatic circles as ‘‘HBJ’’ was the regional leader that Cameron spoke to the most often and the two had shared their hostility toward Gaddafi and their desire for strong condemnation during the Prime Minister’s trip to the Gulf.³⁰⁵ The prominent role of Al Jazeera in covering events in Tahrir Square had strengthened the soft power credentials of the small Gulf state and despite its own autocratic political system, Qatar saw itself as the potential beneficiary of democratization beyond its own borders.³⁰⁶ Unlike Saudi Arabia and UAE, who both feared the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar had cultivated links with regional Islamist leaders in the preceding years and was well-placed to capitalise on these connections in the event of their achieving power.³⁰⁷ Doha was therefore a key voice within the Arab League pushing for intervention.

In addition to these particular circumstances, British diplomatic lobbying almost certainly played a role in securing support from the Arab League. The *Guardian’s* investigation credits Hague with helping persuade the League’s Secretary General Amr Moussa, an outcome partly attributed to the Foreign Secretary’s previous policy of cultivating bilateral links.³⁰⁸ The FAC’s Libya inquiry also received evidence from Dominic Asquith, who while serving at this time as

March 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/5079290/Muammar-Gaddafi-accuses-Saudi-Arabias-King-Abdullah-of-lying-at-Arab-summit.html>

³⁰³ For African reactions to the crisis, see Alex De Waal ‘‘African Roles in the Libyan Conflict of 2011,’’ *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 365-379.

³⁰⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014).

³⁰⁵ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 98-99.

³⁰⁶ Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 106-115.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 100-103.

³⁰⁸ Wintour and Watt, ‘‘Cameron’s Libyan War.’’

Britain's Ambassador to Egypt, was clearly involved in this kind of lobbying.³⁰⁹ It was not then, as the government later sought to imply, that Britain and France were asked to introduce a no-fly zone by concerned Arab states. Instead, Britain asked the Arab states to ask them to take these measures, seemingly for presentational reasons. As Hague later explained, "any action that appeared to be the west trying to impose itself on these countries would be counter-productive, as has been suggested."³¹⁰

With Gaddafi's forces rapidly regaining territories on the ground, the Arab League, under pressure from the Gulf states, passed a resolution calling for the implementation of a no-fly zone on 12 March.³¹¹ The British government could now unequivocally claim to have the "regional support" it was seeking, but it was still far from guaranteed that the UN would approve military action. In addition to the prospect of either a Russian or Chinese veto, the government would need to build a coalition of nine states to vote in favour of any proposed action. With all of the BRICS states then present on the Council, such an outcome could not be taken for granted given their suspicion of humanitarian intervention.³¹² Key players in the Obama administration were far from convinced of the necessity or wisdom of intervening. Remarkably, as late as 15 March, Obama himself remained very firmly the fence. The reticence toward intervention was equally felt in Germany, which also sat on the Council during this period.³¹³

According to Seldon and Snowden, Cameron informed his cabinet on 7 March that he believed a no-fly zone was necessary, with or without UN approval.³¹⁴ The level and extent of any internal division at this stage is unclear. Both Seldon and Snowden and D'Ancona give the impression that many were still sceptical, but it is unclear whether such scepticism was

³⁰⁹ FAC, "Oral Evidence," *Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options*, HC 520, 27 October 2015, Q. 112.

³¹⁰ HC Deb, 17/03/2011, c. 504.

³¹¹ League of Arab States, "Resolution No. 7360," 12 March 2011.

³¹² For wider context on this point, see Ramesh Thakur, "R2P After Libya and Syria: Engaging Emerging Powers," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2013): 61-76.

³¹³ For an excellent account of the German position, see Sara Brockmeier, "Germany and the Intervention in Libya," *Survival* 55, no. 6 (2013): 63-90.

³¹⁴ Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 102.

expressed toward the idea of intervention in principle, or merely the idea of acting without the UN.³¹⁵ In contrast, Goodman's account, which also draws on interviews with participants, says the cabinet was now "solidly behind the PM."³¹⁶ Yet regardless of whether other members of the cabinet would have been supportive of military action without a second resolution, the government's public position was in fact consistent with Cameron's private stance. During PMQs on 9 March, Cameron declined the opportunity to rule out military action without UN approval.³¹⁷ As Hague explained, while a Chapter VII resolution would provide the clearest basis, it was "not a completely open-and-shut argument."³¹⁸ When the FAC met on 16 March, at the very time Britain and France were tabling a second resolution, Hague made clear that the government felt it was legally permitted to take action regardless of the outcome of the vote. The Foreign Secretary concurred with Menzies Campbell's contrived notion of a "duty to protect" and asserted that "in the case of overwhelming humanitarian need or in self-defence, nations are allowed to take action."³¹⁹

As the government set out in pursuit of regional support and "clear legal basis," the third criteria largely took care of itself. The regime's counter-offensive saw it retake a number of coastal towns in the second week of March, as forces loyal to Gaddafi rapidly advanced eastward. As Kuperman has pointed out, such advances did not involve the "massacres" and the deliberate targeting of civilians in the manner claimed by Western politicians, but the city of Benghazi was surely a different prospect.³²⁰ By the time Britain and France tabled their resolution on 15 March, the regime's forces were fast approaching the country's second city and the epicentre of the revolution. Benghazi, a city with a population of approximately 650,000, would have been the likely venue for a last stand. Given Gaddafi's ominous threats to

³¹⁵ Ibid; D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 165-169. The problem with D'Ancona's account is that it jumps backward and forward often without providing clear dates for the events being described.

³¹⁶ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 270.

³¹⁷ HC Deb, 09/03/2011, c. 904.

³¹⁸ HC Deb, 15/03/2011, c. 154.

³¹⁹ FAC, "Minutes of Evidence," *Developments in UK Foreign Policy*, 16 March 2011, Q 19, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmfaaff/881/11031601.htm>

³²⁰ Kuperman, "Model Humanitarian Intervention?" 112-113.

those who did not lay down their arms, significant loss of life was anticipated. On 17 March, in a radio broadcast ahead of his forces assault on Benghazi, Gaddafi was reported as having promised to show “no mercy and no pity to them” adding that “we will find you in your closets.”³²¹ Although the comment was directed toward rebel groups, rather than civilians, such language naturally reinforced the prospect of sustained and indiscriminate bloodshed.

As the threat to Benghazi’s population became clearer, British politicians began making more frequent, often simplistic, parallels with Bosnia and Rwanda. Denis MacShane captured the fears of many in Parliament when he said on 15 March that “there is a whiff of Bosnia of 15, 16, 17 years ago about all of this. We do not want the Foreign Secretary to talk about discussions at the UN, empty EU statements and NATO meetings that result in nothing.”³²²

While these comparisons were especially common among Labour MPs, Liberal Democrats invoked similar memories. The most powerful Lib Dem voice on foreign policy, Sir Menzies Campbell, encouraged the government to intervene with or without UN approval. Recalling the Bosnian conflict he spoke of “the lessons from that unhappy period” as a self-evident justification for some form of military action.³²³ After an EU Council meeting on 11 March, a journalist invoked the comparison for the Prime Minister, who replied by acknowledging, “I think you are making a good point, which is many people say we have to learn the lesson of Iraq, and yes we do, but we also have to learn the lesson of what happened in former Yugoslavia, in Bosnia as well, and I think that is important”.³²⁴ This was the first instance of what was to become a familiar theme. For Cameron and many of that generation, the lessons of Bosnia took precedence over those of Iraq.

³²¹ Souhail Karam and Tom Heneghan, “Gaddafi Tells Benghazi his Army is Coming Tonight,” Reuters, 17 March 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/03/17/libya-gaddafi-address-idUKLDE72G2E920110317>

³²² HC Deb, 15/03/2011, cc. 154-155.

³²³ HC Deb, 17/03/2011, c. 515.

³²⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, “Press Conference in Brussels,” 11 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/press-conference-in-brussels>

This was not simply an attempt to appease domestic political pressure. Analogies with Bosnia were a driving force of internal deliberations in the build up to the second resolution. The evidence that has subsequently emerged strengthens the claim made in the existing accounts that this was arguably that the single most important factor in the government's decision-making calculus. For Hague, while he might not have displayed the same hawkish instincts as Cameron, not intervening was simply not possible. Reflecting on the intervention in 2015, the former Foreign Secretary referred to these kind of foreign policy decisions as a "choice between unpalatable alternatives" but he strongly resisted the suggestion that he might, with the benefit of hindsight, have acted with greater caution.³²⁵ For Hague, this was primarily a moral dilemma and he made clear that faced with the same situation again, he would pursue the same course of action, arguing that "I would wonder where the standards of morality of the western world had come to if we were not going to take decisions such as that."³²⁶

From this perspective, the apparent costs of inaction were amplified above and beyond the risks of intervention, ensuring a negative argument took precedence over a positive one. Non-military responses were seen as entailing equal responsibility for the outcome, in a simple binary framing that pitted action against inaction. In both his testimony to the FAC and a later interview with Lord Hennessy, Hague invoked the memory of Rwanda as a key justification for the action taken and his continued lack of regret:

I have stood and placed wreaths at the Srebrenica memorial and at the Rwanda memorial, with thousands of dead bodies underneath me. When you do that, you have many thousands of bodies underneath your feet because in each case the world did nothing when thousands of people were being slaughtered – in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands. When you are in office

³²⁵ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q. 286.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 307.

facing this situation, that is what you have to think about. Are you going to let that happen again?³²⁷

This sense responsibility extended to those who were both the most sceptical of intervention and in the best position to be aware of its potential difficulties and limitations. Fox was both sceptical of the initial proposals to intervene and willing to accept criticism of the way in which the intervention unfolded, but once the scale of the threat to Benghazi became apparent, he felt that “our hand had been forced.”³²⁸ Having revisited all the documents from this time of crisis, he later chose to emphasise the importance of this historical lesson in shaping the context in which the decision was made, stressing that “I think the driver – and I go back to this point – was the fear of a civilian slaughter of the sort we had seen in the Balkans.”³²⁹ The key points from Fox’s testimony are mirrored by the recollections of Richards, who was equally if not more reticent than the Defence Secretary in his attitude toward intervention. Richards recalled “a lot of talk about Srebrenica” and says the decision was taken to prevent Benghazi from falling because “it would be a stain on our conscience forever if we allowed another Srebrenica.”³³⁰ Such fears were therefore significant enough not only to prompt Cameron and others to push for intervention but perhaps more importantly, to convince doubters and sceptics that they could not in good conscience prevent the rush to war.

In addition, it needs reiterating that any decision to intervene was not the outcome of months of gradual deliberation and contingency planning. When the NSC debated whether it would be necessary to intervene so as to prevent “another Srebrenica,” it did so at a pace determined by events on the ground and under the watchful eye of the 24-7 media. One official recalled, “we didn’t have the luxury they had in the 1990s of having time to react to events.”³³¹ This was arguably the key point of emphasis in Richards’ account of what happened, as he explained that

³²⁷ Ibid., Q. 287. See also BBC, “Reflections with Peter Hennessy,” Series 5, Interview with William Hague, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b0910n6j>

³²⁸ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 1 December 2015, Q. 151.

³²⁹ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 269.

³³⁰ Ibid., Q. 333.

³³¹ Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 140.

“what I hoped 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.”³³² Fox recalled a similar set of demands, describing how “what struck me, going back and looking at the ministerial papers... was the speed at which events were moving.”³³³ As he also recalled, the government was not simply thinking of the consequences of intervention, but of the consequences of not intervening, a calculation shaped by Gaddafi’s ominous-sounding rhetoric.³³⁴

For those who would otherwise be more cautious in their approach, this humanitarian imperative was central. For those who, like the Prime Minister, were more naturally inclined to favour a hawkish position, this imperative was conjoined with an ideological one. Libyan civilians were more worthy of protection precisely because they were on the right side of history and their opposition to Gaddafi represented the march of democratic progress. Their deaths would not simply be a humanitarian catastrophe but would signal the failure of the “Arab Spring.” Cameron was firm in his conviction that “it is a revolt by the people, who want to have greater democracy in their country,” a conviction that reinforced the necessity of their salvation.³³⁵ Arming himself against charges of inconsistency, the Prime Minister responded with the argument that while “we cannot do everything, but that does not mean we should do nothing.”³³⁶ In this instance, Cameron felt Britain could do something and he explained he was “very clear that a no-fly zone is something we should consider, because it may help to stop atrocities being committed *against people who want a more democratic future.*”³³⁷ The last bit is key, as it implicitly combined the idea of humanitarian intervention with an emerging right to democracy. The sceptics willingly converted themselves to the cause in order to save civilians, others more forcefully pressed the case for action to save civilians *and* ensure the victory of what they took for granted to be democratic forces.

³³² FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 341.

³³³ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 1 December 2015, Q. 153.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ HC Deb, 02/03/2011, c. 297.

³³⁶ HC Deb, 14/03/2011, c. 32.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

National interest played an ambiguous and secondary role in these discussions. When the NSC finally took the decision to support intervention in principle, Hague recalls how, ‘I remember the Prime Minister summing up the meeting and saying, ‘the key question is this: is it in the British national interest, if this is about to happen in Benghazi and this conflict is happening in this way, for us to intervene? That is the question we have to decide’’³³⁸ However, this recollection arguably misrepresents the nature of the debates that were being held. There was a wider strategic argument that supporting the Arab Spring was in British interests, given Britain’s security, commercial and energy interests in the Middle East and the potential benefits of a successful transition across the region. Cameron had made a similar point in his speech before the Kuwaiti National Assembly and Clegg offered a more finessed version of this particular argument in a speech in Mexico in early March.³³⁹ However, the wisdom of this reformist and liberal vision of national interest was not self-evident. Those who adhered to a more traditional conception of national interest instinctively saw the prospect of unrest across the Arab world as a potential threat. In short, national interest was an indeterminate guide to policy.

When it came to Libya specifically, the national interest case for intervention emphasised geographical proximity, the threat of a refugee crisis and the potential menace if the regime’s forces were allowed to ‘‘run amok.’’³⁴⁰ This latter argument could recall Gaddafi’s controversial past. As Cameron informed the media during his Brussels press conference on 11 March, ‘‘we should never forget this man’s track record. This is a regime which for years supported terrorism around the world and which was implicated in the biggest mass murder ever on British soil, the Lockerbie bombing, as well as being associated with the deaths of many innocent people around the world.’’³⁴¹ The government conjured the image of a ‘‘pariah state’’ that would ‘‘fester’’ on Europe’s southern border.³⁴² The Prime Minister therefore insisted that,

³³⁸ FAC, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 1 December 2015, Q. 171.

³³⁹ Nick Clegg, ‘‘Building Open Societies.’’

³⁴⁰ HC Deb, 15/03/2011, c. 154.

³⁴¹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Press Conference in Brussels.’’

³⁴² HC Deb, 14/03/2011, c. 27.

“this is in our interests, it is not some great adventure that is being planned.”³⁴³ However, while Cameron and Hague did forcefully make the case that this was in Britain’s national interest, they do not present these arguments until a relatively late stage. The timing of these arguments and their presentation suggests that their primary purpose was to appease sceptical Tory backbenchers. As Holland and Aaronson conclude in their analysis of the government’s justifications for intervening, national interest was a “secondary argument” and that it was “at least in part, invoked to silence those sceptical of an intervention designed solely to ‘save strangers.’”³⁴⁴ Hague’s memory of the crucial meeting is also somewhat contradicted by Richards’ account, which suggests it was simply not possible to fully assess the national interest within the time constraints and that different individuals would in any case reach different assessments on this principle.³⁴⁵ Above all though, throughout the evidence reviewed references to national interest are significantly outweighed by moral or value-based arguments and references to Srebrenica.

Similar moral arguments and memories of Bosnia and Rwanda, combined with the speed of events and reports of Gaddafi’s threats, drove forward decision-making at the UN, where international diplomats were pressured into acquiescing to an intervention they might otherwise have harboured doubts about. British and French diplomats were especially effective at seizing the moral high ground in this arena and framing the crisis in a manner of their choosing. As a diplomat involved in the negotiations explained, “the power of determining the agenda, saying: ‘the moral situation is this and the transgressor is this’ – is huge. So it’s difficult to fight against this.”³⁴⁶ Britain and France were able to utilise Libya’s defected ambassador and, following the passage of the Arab League resolution, work alongside the Lebanese delegation, promoting the

³⁴³ HC Deb, 14/03/2011, c. 35.

³⁴⁴ Jack Holland Mark Aaronson, “Dominance Through Coercion: Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification in Afghanistan and Libya,” *Journal of Intervention and State Building* 8, no. 1 (2014): 15.

³⁴⁵ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 327-328.

³⁴⁶ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, “Power in Practice,” 902.

latter as the “Arab voice” on the Council.³⁴⁷ The presence of regional support was likely a factor in persuading Russia and China not to exercise their vetoes.³⁴⁸

The late and dramatic change in the US position was hugely significant, both for the outcome at the UN and for any attempt to interpret British policy.³⁴⁹ While Obama had called for contingency planning at the end of February, he remained cautiously opposed to intervention until as late as 15 March. Secretary of State Clinton was seemingly in the sceptics’ camp until as late as 14 March. Her own account makes clear that it was following the meeting in Paris on this day that she turned decisively in favour of intervention.³⁵⁰ In addition to realising the strength of Arab support, it was at this particular meeting that she first met Mahmoud Jibril, a leading representative of the rebel National Transitional Council (NTC), who she found “impressive and polished.”³⁵¹ The British Foreign Secretary’s lobbying also made a favourable impression on Clinton, who recalled that, “if Hague thought military action in Libya was necessary, that counted for a lot. I knew that he, like me, was wary of making such decisions without confidence in the rationale, strategy and end game.”³⁵² It was following this meeting that Clinton communicated her views back to Washington and most accounts of the US decision see her as the decisive voice that tilted Obama in favour of intervening. As a thorough investigation of her role in US policy for the *New York Times* later concluded, this was “arguably her moment of greatest influence as secretary of state.”³⁵³

With Clinton having persuasively made the case to the White House, Obama finally and reluctantly decided to support intervention on 15 March, in what he described to his frustrated

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 899.

³⁴⁸ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 19.

³⁴⁹ For good overviews of the US reaction to Libya see Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 2-3; Mann, *The Obamians*, 281-301; Josh Rogan, “How Obama Turned on a Dime Toward War,” *Foreign Policy*, 18 March 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/18/how-obama-turned-on-a-dime-toward-war/>

³⁵⁰ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 367-370. A similar account of this meeting is provided in Joe Becker and Scott Shane, “The Libya Gamble Part 1; Hillary Clinton, ‘Smart Power’ and a Dictator’s Fall,” *The New York Times*, 27 February 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html>

³⁵¹ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 369.

³⁵² Ibid, 368.

³⁵³ Becker and Shane, “Libya Gamble Part 1.”

Defence Secretary as a “51-49 decision.”³⁵⁴ Additionally, Obama’s method of deliberation, described by one official as “almost a Socratic method” led him to conclude that if the US was going to intervene, there was little purpose in merely establishing a no-fly zone.³⁵⁵ The Pentagon’s contingency planning had made clear this would have little impact on the ground and would not prevent the massacre many were anticipating. The President therefore insisted on better options.³⁵⁶ The end result of Obama’s u-turn was the insertion of the clause “all necessary measures” into the draft resolution tabled by Britain and France, thereby authorising a much broader range of military actions. Arab suspicions were alleviated through the phrase “excluding an army of foreign occupation.”³⁵⁷

This episode sheds important light on the nature of the “special relationship” during this period. Firstly, there is some evidence suggesting the British and French leaderships, aware of Washington’s lack of appetite for intervention in Libya, were seriously contemplating taking action without the US. According to D’Ancona’s account, while the possibility of an Anglo-French operation was never discussed at NSC or cabinet level, Cameron and his close advisers were considering this possibility.³⁵⁸ In fact, Chivvis suggests that by 11 March US officials were concerned that Britain and France would intervene on their own and that their inferior capabilities would see them make the situation worse.³⁵⁹ Clinton too, gathered this impression from her meeting in Paris on the 14th and informed the White House that Britain and France would take action regardless of US support.³⁶⁰ Secondly, Britain appears to have been out of the loop regarding the sudden change in the US position. When Susan Rice first proposed broadening the mandate in the draft resolution, Britain and France suspected a “trick.”³⁶¹ During Prime Minister’s Questions on 16 March, the day before the resolution passed, Cameron

³⁵⁴ Gates, *Duty*, 519.

³⁵⁵ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 3.

³⁵⁶ Gates, *Duty*, 519.

³⁵⁷ Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, “Power in Practice,” 901.

³⁵⁸ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 183.

³⁵⁹ Chivvis, *Toppling Gaddafi*, Ch. 3.

³⁶⁰ Becker and Shane, “Libya Gamble Part 1.”

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

referred only to conversations taking place, but gave no hint of any broadening of the mandate.³⁶² Nor either did Hague, in lengthy discussions with FAC on the same day.³⁶³

On 17 March, the Security Council passed resolution 1973, which authorised “all necessary measures” to protect “civilians and civilian populated areas,” with ten countries voting in favour.³⁶⁴ This outcome was the product of unique diplomatic circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated. The change in the US position, in addition to broadening the mandate, was also key to a successful vote. Four of the five BRICS chose to abstain. That South Africa did not do so, despite subsequently emerging as a major critic of the Libyan intervention, is perhaps partly attributable to US diplomatic pressure.³⁶⁵ The South African decision was important because it also likely determined the position taken by Gabon. Absent those two African votes, the resolution would not have passed.

These empirical details are also necessary for any historical judgement of British policy, for reasons that have been largely overlooked in the existing accounts. The latter have often tended to end in a triumphalist manner, with the outcome in New York and the sparing of Benghazi seen as a vindication for a Prime Minister who adopted a hawkish stance early on. For example, Wintour and Watt approvingly quote the Minister for International Development, Andrew Mitchell, claiming that “David was brave and proved right in the beginning... All the *soi-disant* experts said, you cannot do it from the air, the Americans said it was naïve, but he stuck to his guns.”³⁶⁶ This ignores the extent to which Britain, and Cameron in particular, were effectively saved by Obama’s late intervention. While the purpose of this research is not to enter into normative judgements about the wisdom or not of intervening, those reflecting back on this episode with a full possession of the facts must conclude that without the “all necessary measures” clause, and without the US providing the overwhelming share of the capabilities during the initial effort to establish the no-fly zone, the experts Mitchell is dismissing would

³⁶² HC Deb, 16/03/2011, cc. 291-303.

³⁶³ FAC, “Minutes of Evidence,” 16 March 2011.

³⁶⁴ UN Security Council, Resolution 1973, S/Res/1973, 17 March 2011, para 4.

³⁶⁵ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 373.

³⁶⁶ Wintour and Watt, “Swept Aside Sceptics.”

most likely have been proven right. It would have been impossible to have prevented Benghazi's fall with a simple no-fly zone alone and an Anglo-Franco operation would in any case have been far riskier, less extensive and have taken longer to establish than that which the US put in place during Operation Odyssey Dawn.

Within the British NSC, a decision had already been made before the vote in New York, that Britain would take military action in the event that a resolution could be secured. This fact was revealed in Hague's testimony to the FAC, although it is unclear exactly when this decision was made.³⁶⁷ As already noted, Cameron favoured intervening with or without UN approval and Hague had made clear that the government's position was that a second resolution was preferable, but not essential. Ultimately though, we cannot know how decision-makers would have reacted had the conclusion of Anglo-French diplomatic wrangling not been successful. Resolution 1973 meant a decision already made in principle could now be put into effect. The cabinet signed off on the intervention on the advice of the NSC and the government followed the precedent established by Blair in allowing the Commons to vote on military action. While the vote took place after the decision had already been made, this was entirely due to the impossibility of scheduling one in time given the speed with which events were moving. In any case, the government would have been aware that it had widespread support for military action in Parliament, which resulted in 557 MPs voting in favour of intervention and just 13 rebels opposed when the motion was debated on 21 March.³⁶⁸

In a highly critical account of British decision-making processes, Michael Clarke has asserted that this was a "top-down" decision driven by a Prime Minister whose style emulated the "sofa" government of the Blair years.³⁶⁹ Similarly, most of the existing accounts referenced in this chapter create the impression that this decision was forced through in the face of some stiff opposition. While it is quite likely that there were contrary voices when Cameron first began pushing for intervention at the end of February, this interpretation seems to overstate the extent

³⁶⁷ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 1 December 2015, Q. 171

³⁶⁸ HC Deb, 21/03/2011, cc. 802-807.

³⁶⁹ Clarke, "Britain's Libya Strategy," 7-14.

of opposition. Firstly, Cameron was far from alone in his enthusiasm. Osborne and Gove are both described as “neocons” and while the latter was not present on the NSC, he was generally regarded as being a powerful voice in cabinet.³⁷⁰ Cameron was also clearly egged on by his chief of staff, Ed Llewellyn.³⁷¹ Had Cameron really had to confront such scepticism, he would have done so with powerful allies.

Secondly, the debate took place over a three week period, during which time developments on the ground in Libya and in the arenas of international diplomacy moved rapidly. It is entirely likely that Cameron faced widespread scepticism when he first began making the case for intervention at the end of February, but it does not follow that this was necessarily the case two or three weeks later. Most reports indicate that Hague was initially cautious, but the strength of his conviction in favour of intervention remained undiminished even given the subsequent fallout in Libya. Hillary Clinton’s memoirs, and her description of her meeting with Hague at the G8 foreign ministers’ meeting on 14 March, would indicate that by this point at the latest, the Foreign Secretary had firmly turned to support intervention.³⁷² As shown by the evidence reviewed in this chapter, he was adamant that intervention was the right thing to do for moral reasons and later had no regrets about his decision. The same argument would apply to the Deputy Prime Minister. Perhaps Clegg expressed some doubts initially, but he soon became a keen supporter of intervention. Officials would describe him as a “liberal interventionist” and Clegg made a speech describing himself in these terms.³⁷³

Thirdly, the development of the three criteria, and the fact that this approach originated with Hague, contradicts the notion that Cameron was simply ignoring or bypassing those who were initially less inclined to agree with him. The relationship between Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary within the Coalition government was radically different to that which existed in the

³⁷⁰ Wintour and Watt, “Cameron’s Libyan War”; D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 166.

³⁷¹ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 166.

³⁷² Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 368.

³⁷³ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 168; Nick Clegg, “An Axis of Openness: Renewing Multilateralism for the 21st Century,” 29 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/an-axis-of-openness-renewing-multilateralism-for-the-21st-century>

Blair years. Hague was not subordinate to Cameron and he recalls that while Cameron came to power with detailed ideas for Afghanistan, ‘‘I felt as Foreign Secretary in his administration I had a great deal of freedom to propose what I wanted about much of the rest of foreign policy.’’³⁷⁴ Cameron asserted himself over Libya, but the Foreign Office played a key role in the crafting of the first resolution and it was Hague who introduced the three criteria shaping the pursuit of the second resolution. Addressing these criteria helped alleviate many of the concerns that would have initially arisen over issues such as legality and international support. Fourthly, scepticism about the feasibility and utility of military action would have significantly diminished following US support for intervention. It is true that Cameron brushed aside concerns about the practical value of a no-fly zone and overlooked the possibility that British intervention alone would not decisively impact the outcome in Libya. In the end though the US change of position would have entirely removed these doubts and concerns, both by broadening the UN mandate and bringing America’s superior capabilities to the table.

Fifthly, attention on splits and divisions detracts from a consensus that existed in government from the outset. Almost everyone shared the view that Gaddafi must be removed from his position.³⁷⁵ As already shown, British policy was committed to this outcome before Cameron began pushing for military options. Within government, Sawers, Richards and Fox were in the relative minority in questioning the wisdom of such a policy, but there appears to have been a political consensus, both within and without the government and borne of the spirit of the Arab Spring, that Gaddafi simply had to go. Added to this fact, as the analysis in this section has shown, there was also a universal consensus that whatever private doubts key individuals might have had about intervening, such doubts were in the last resort insufficient to counteract the collective feeling that Britain could not allow Benghazi to fall. By the time force was finally

³⁷⁴ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 263

³⁷⁵ The one exception was Fox. According to D’Ancona’s account, he repeatedly raised the issue of plans for a post-Gaddafi aftermath in early NSC meetings, despite later claiming no responsibility for this area. See D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 167. However, there is no evidence of any politician from either end of the spectrum publicly challenging the insistence that Gaddafi depart power.

committed, Cameron did not need to brush anyone aside, the sceptics themselves had accepted the necessity of intervention.

Conclusions

When first announcing this triumph in Parliament, Cameron was able to insist that the three criteria which had framed his pursuit of a no fly zone were “satisfied in full.”³⁷⁶ Such claims were ostensibly true. There had been an explicit request from the opposition forces themselves, an explicit request from the Arab League, and while the African Union had been more sceptical about military action, the African members of the Security Council had all voted in favour. Resolution 1973 resolved any questions about what constituted “clear legal basis” while President Obama’s late change of heart meant any doubts about the efficacy or feasibility of what was being proposed were now no longer at issue. As for demonstrable need, few could doubt that the situation on the ground required a rapid response in order to prevent significant loss of life. A decision that had already been made in principle could now be put into effect.

The impetus to intervene came directly from Number 10 and David Cameron personally. Without the Prime Minister’s willingness to take risks and push for a strong response it is unlikely Britain would have become involved, not because others were fundamentally opposed to intervention, but because the speed with which the threat was developing required a rapid political and diplomatic mobilization. Cameron’s hawkishness made this possible. The final decision itself was then a formality, the culmination of a series of prior moves that had removed the obstacles in the way of a course of action that many were already committed to in principle. While it is natural to think in terms of “decisions” it is perhaps more appropriate to think of Britain’s response in evolutionary terms. For example, those who supported stronger diplomatic action against the regime during the early stages of the crisis may not have envisioned a military response would be necessary or desirable, yet the very diplomatic action they took helped increased the likelihood of this eventuality.

³⁷⁶ HC Deb, 18/03/2011, c. 613.

None the less, a decision was made in the NSC, approximately between 12 and 16 March, that Britain would intervene to prevent the fall of Benghazi if a Chapter VII resolution could be passed. The analysis in this chapter has suggested that Britain would have intervened without UN approval, although a controversial decision such as this was not necessary. This chapter has provided further evidence to support the claim that fears of a massacre on the scale seen in the Balkans in the 1990s was a primary driver of this decision. Importantly though, while a determination to prevent such a possibility was a key motivator for those like the Prime Minister who aggressively pressed the case for action it was just as important, if not more important, in persuading others to acquiesce to an intervention about which they shared some reservations.

Notwithstanding this argument, an exclusive focus on memories of Srebrenica would lead to an incomplete understanding of the moral case for intervention and a simplistic assessment of the Prime Minister's psychology. The wider context of the Arab Spring, longstanding beliefs about Britain's role on the world stage and Cameron's personal dislike of Gaddafi were also relevant. So too was the context in which the decisions took place. This context was shaped by extremely fast-moving events, a poor intelligence picture and significant media pressure. These additional arguments are not mutually exclusive with an explanation that highlights the importance of memories of Bosnia in the 1990s. They do, however, suggest a more nuanced account of Britain's decision to intervene and one that gives full weight to both analogies with Srebrenica and the importance of the Arab Spring.

Additionally, acknowledging the Prime Minister's centrality does not mean ignoring the role played by other actors, or misrepresenting the nature and extent of scepticism Cameron had to overcome in pushing his case. Hague can be credited with outlining the approach that guided the government's final decision to intervene and its pursuit of a second resolution. Existing explanations have tended to downplay or ignore the significance of both the first UN resolution and the "three criteria" in the development of Britain's response. The importance of the three criteria also suggests a more subtle understanding of the divisions within the British

government. Although Cameron's strength of conviction drove him forward, the importance attached to issues such as regional support and the effort taken to build a case at the UN show that if there were concerns about the diplomatic fallout from any intervention then these were not ignored or brushed aside. More importantly, this analysis shows that the changing situation on the ground led many to conclude that they had no choice but to sanction intervention, even with the risks this might entail.

If there is one instance where it is more accurate to suggest that the Prime Minister simply ignored or overruled sceptics, it is in relation to the presence of concerns about the limitations of a no-fly zone and the potential shortcomings of British military capabilities. This argument must also acknowledge, however, that it was the US change of position that removed these issues. On this basis, it is wrong to portray subsequent events as a vindication of Cameron's strong response, given that the failure of these concerns to materialise was the result of fortuitous circumstances. Libya can be viewed as one of those instances where Cameron's penchant for risk taking initially paid off, but alongside an appreciation of his boldness and resolve, the role of chance and contingency deserves its place in our retelling of this episode in British foreign policy.

This willingness to take risks when considering the possible use of military force, alongside the extent to which moral considerations took precedence over more traditional understandings of national interest, is the potential avenue toward a wider argument. The Libyan intervention can be seen as displaying facets of both liberal internationalism and liberal interventionism. Which of these facets we choose to emphasise is important in how we characterise the beliefs and assumptions that shaped British decision-making. These beliefs are vital to understand precisely because Libya was, like the majority of conflicts Britain has pursued in the post-Cold War era, a war of choice. It was not for reasons of national security or self-defence, strategic calculation, alliance loyalty or even domestic political pressure that Britain decided to intervene. It was because Cameron, like Blair before him, believed it was the right thing to do.

Fully addressing the question of how we might classify or characterise the beliefs and assumptions that shaped Britain's intervention in Libya cannot be completed without first analysing how British policy played out after the immediate goal of establishing a no-fly zone and liberating Benghazi had been achieved. That is the task of the following chapter. For now, it is worth making two observations to prepare the ground.

Firstly, the decision to intervene is good evidence that Cameron himself was a liberal interventionist, at least in his response to Libya. That Britain's approach also displayed elements of liberal internationalism is partly attributable to the fact that Cameron himself was not the sole architect of policy. His willingness to call for intervention, without first having tested the diplomatic waters nor fully consulted his cabinet, is an act that shows a lack of the cautiousness toward intervention that he claimed to possess while in opposition. It is true, as Daddow and Schnapper eloquently put it, that the Prime Minister attempted to chart a course "between the Scylla of Major's moral bankruptcy over Bosnia and the Charybdis of Blair's adventurism in Iraq."³⁷⁷ Yet this attempt, even in its earliest stages, clearly veered toward the latter. Bound up with Cameron's desire to prevent another Srebrenica, was his ideological sympathy for rebel forces about which he knew little, an uncompromising insistence upon regime change and a tendency to see Middle Eastern politics through a Manichean prism.

The two key differences between Libya and the "adventurism" of the Blair years was the greater emphasis on "regional support" and the decision to rule out ground forces. The determination to avoid the impression of imposing solutions from outside and a desire to preserve good relationships with key regional players represent a lesson learned from 2003 and perhaps, a more pragmatic approach. The decision to rule out ground troops was primarily a reflection that such considerations would have been operating in a fantasy land given strong opposition to such a prospect from Middle Eastern states, Libyans themselves and British public opinion. Add to that the impossibility of securing UN approval, cuts to defence spending and ongoing commitments in Afghanistan, it is no surprise that such an option was not seriously

³⁷⁷ Daddow and Schnapper, "Liberal Intervention," 342.

entertained. The extent to which there has been an attitudinal revision is therefore difficult to assess, as even the most ardent of neoconservatives would have been unlikely to have insisted on ground forces in such circumstances.

Elsewhere, what appear at first glance to be fundamental differences with previous conflicts are on closer inspection differences of degree. It is true that the government demonstrably attached more importance to international legitimacy and international law. The securing of a UN Resolution authorising force is not, however, strong evidence of a fundamental change of approach, but the happy coincidence that resulted from unique circumstances. The evidence reviewed in this chapter shows that the government would likely have intervened without a UN resolution, regardless of the claimed necessity of a “clear legal basis.” The suggestion that military power would now be used for more limited and carefully defined ends, a claim made in the government’s National Security Strategy and seen as a further means of distancing its approach from that of New Labour, is also undermined. This was a leap into the unknown, with little consideration given to what might happen if Gaddafi were to cling to power indefinitely.

Ultimately, this argument stands or falls to a significant extent on the basis of what comes next. Would the British government stick to the terms of the UN mandate? Would it avoid adopting an uncompromising and maximalist position in order to explore the possibility of a diplomatic end to the conflict? Would policy-makers genuinely be capable of limiting their use of force to the objective of preventing loss of civilian life? If answers to the above questions are affirmative, then while the Libyan episode is not absent its dose of liberal interventionism, the Coalition had clearly embraced a fundamentally different approach to the use of force in comparison to its predecessors. On the other hand, the idealistic framing of the Arab Spring, the outraged demands for Gaddafi’s removal, and the blurring of the lines between the desire to save civilians and support democratic transition had already planted the seeds for another round of adventure in the Middle East. As the following chapter will show, UNSC 1973 provided an opportunity that was too tempting for a liberal interventionist to resist.

Chapter Four: Libya: After Benghazi

The swift liberation of Benghazi and the establishment of a no-fly zone fulfilled the immediate objectives that had been advocated by Cameron. This quickly brought to the fore questions about the continuing use of military force, what was and was not permitted according to the terms of the UN resolution, and the ultimate objectives of Britain's Libya policy beyond this point. Accordingly, the first section of this chapter examines why and for what purposes Britain continued military action beyond the stage at which Benghazi had been secured and a no-fly zone put into effect. Although the immediate priority was the prevention of a massacre in Benghazi, the analysis in this chapter supports the argument that democratic regime change was, at the very least, a latent objective of British military intervention from the very beginning.

Following the initial phase of military action and the transition away from a US-led coalition of the willing to NATO command and control, the fighting on the ground settled into a stalemate that lasted between April and July. The analysis in the second section describes how Britain pursued an "anaconda" strategy, based on using a combination of military and non-military pressure and premised on the expectation of encouraging widespread defections to bring about the internal collapse of the regime. This section further shows that the fulfilment of this agenda was obstructed by a range of constraints, foremost among them the limited efficacy of a military strategy almost entirely reliant on air power and the compromises necessary to maintain alliance unity. In these circumstances, Britain and France adopted a series of measured escalations, incrementally tilting the balance on the ground against the regime but without promising to yield a decisive outcome within a realistic timeframe.

The third section examines the possibility of alternative, non-military means for resolving the conflict and analyses the British government's position on the possibility of peace talks. The available evidence suggests that Britain not only failed to seriously explore this option, but actively undermined the efforts of others to mediate between the two sides. The analysis

explores some of the possible explanations and suggests two main reasons for Britain's diplomatic obstructionism. Firstly, as British policy was aimed at encouraging widespread defections, any signal of a weakening of resolve was viewed as counterproductive, and the possibility of peace talks was interpreted in this light. Secondly, although the British government desired an end to the conflict, it was determined to reach such an end on favourable terms and in a manner that was symbolically aligned with its understanding of the conflict. This led to a winner-takes-all strategy, in which Britain could avoid making tactical concessions to Gaddafi and the “democratic” rebels would triumph on the battlefield.

In July, the tide began to turn in favour of the rebel forces, leading to the liberation of Tripoli in August and the capturing and killing of Colonel Gaddafi in October. This breakthrough is generally attributed to a shift in strategy on the part of Britain, France and their Gulf allies, who switched their focus toward seeking a military breakthrough in the western half of the country, in addition to the insertion of special forces to train and assist rebel forces.³⁷⁸ Alongside these actions, NATO took on what amounted to a combat support role, aiding rebel offensives in Tripoli and beyond. The fourth section analyses this change of strategy and the role of British policy during this stage of the conflict. It shows that in pursuing such an approach and continuing to prioritize a military solution, the British government, and Cameron in particular, showed a willingness to take considerable risks and to exceed the boundaries of the UN mandate.

The fleeting sense of vindication occasioned by the death of Gaddafi has since given way to strident criticism, especially of alleged failures in the area of post-conflict planning.³⁷⁹ The fifth section of this chapter considers British policy towards winning the peace in Libya, focusing on the post-conflict planning carried out during the course of intervention and analysing this aspect of policy in the context of perceived parallels with nation-building in Iraq. The analysis lends

³⁷⁸ Anthony Bell and David Witter, *The Libyan Revolution Part 4: The Tide Turns* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), 13-17; Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 7.

³⁷⁹ FAC, *Libya: Examination Of Intervention*; Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, *Escaping the Fragility Trap*, April 2018, https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Escaping-the-fragility-trap_Aug-2018.pdf; Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, Ch. 10.

weight to the assessment that British policy was based on poor intelligence, faulty assumptions and a lack of adequate planning, despite a greater recognition of the importance of this area of policy following the experience of Iraq. However, the evidence further shows that rather than blithely repeating the mistakes of that conflict, the Coalition government often wrongly applied the “lessons” taken from Iraq in a way that undermined its efforts to support transition in Libya.

The final, concluding section explores the underlying ideas and philosophies that shaped the intervention. It argues that while Cameron and Hague positioned themselves as pragmatists and sought to resist efforts to draw wider lessons from this conflict, such rhetoric ultimately obscures the extent to which British military action in Libya was driven by assumptions that show strong parallels with the liberal interventionism outlined in Chapter Two. The purpose of advancing this argument is not simply to engage in label-making for its own sake, but to instead identify the beliefs and assumptions that drove British intervention in Libya. While many factors were involved in explaining the development of British policy, this was a war of choice that was profoundly shaped by the liberal interventionist philosophy and instincts of many in the Coalition government, particularly Prime Minister Cameron.

Democratic Regime Change: British Objectives in Libya

Military action under a US-led coalition quickly succeeded in preventing the fall of Benghazi and establishing a no-fly zone.³⁸⁰ At the same time, strikes against the regime’s ground forces not only prevented Gaddafi from retaking Benghazi, but helped relieve the besieged city of Misrata and facilitated rebel advances against Ajdabiyah and Brega. Poorly organized opposition forces were able to advance as far as fifty miles east of Sirte, before a counter-attack forced them back to Ajdabiyah. Gaddafi’s forces therefore held the strategically important oil town of Brega, establishing a frontline that would remain largely unchanged until the middle of

³⁸⁰ MOD, “Libyan Air Force Neutralised,” 23 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/libyan-air-force-neutralised>. For a more detailed description see Anthony Bell and David Witter, *The Libyan Revolution Part 2: Escalation and Intervention* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), 24-27.

July.³⁸¹ Immediately following the passage of Resolution 1973, Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy released a joint declaration laying out their interpretation of the resolution and additional “non-negotiable” terms for the Gaddafi regime.³⁸² The statement called for the re-establishment of water, electricity and gas to certain areas and access to humanitarian assistance for the Libyan people. It also specifically called for Gaddafi to pull his forces back from Benghazi and withdraw them from Adjabiya, Misrata and Zawiyah.

These terms quickly provided the rationale for indefinitely continuing military action and the de facto demands for any possible ceasefire. In his statement to the House before the vote on military action on 21 March, Cameron reiterated these terms and made clear that “the government’s view is that those non-negotiable terms are entirely consistent with implementing the resolution.”³⁸³ This position raised the bar for the ceasefire demanded by the UN, by calling for the reversal of territorial changes made before the passage of the resolution.³⁸⁴ When he next addressed Parliament a week later, Cameron brushed aside calls for “exit strategies” by repeating this position, telling MPs that “I think that what we should hold true to is the strong UN Security Council resolution that is about a no-fly zone, about protecting civilians and about getting humanitarian aid in. To comply with that, Gaddafi must comply with all the things in the resolution and with what the President of the United States set out in his statement. I see no sign of that happening and, as that is not happening, we are right to go on enforcing the resolution.”³⁸⁵ Both the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary dismissed the possibility of a ceasefire by pointing to the fact that Gaddafi’s claims to have implemented one were instantly disproven by events on the ground. Cameron therefore rebuffed the suggestion of seeking one

³⁸¹ Bell and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 3*, 13-17.

³⁸² Prime Minister’s Office, “Joint Statement on Libya from the UK, US and France with the Support of Arab States,” 18 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-libya-from-the-uk-us-and-france-with-the-support-of-arab-states>

³⁸³ HC Deb, 21/03/2011, c. 701.

³⁸⁴ Gaddafi’s forces had already reoccupied Zawiyah and Ajdabiyah before 17 March. See Bell and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 2*, 23.

³⁸⁵ HC Deb, 28/03/2011, c. 46. The reference to the statement by the US President is misleading, as this statement simply repeated, word for word, the joint statement cited above. See The White House, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya,” 18 March 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/remarks-president-situation-libya>

by arguing that, “of course everyone would welcome a ceasefire, but let us be frank – two ceasefires have been announced by Colonel Gaddafi, both of which have been broken, so I think that we should have a heavy degree of scepticism about what this man says.”³⁸⁶ While such scepticism was clearly justified, this position effectively placed all the onus on the side of the regime for achieving an end to the fighting.³⁸⁷ The government did not respond to news of advances by rebel forces by calling for them to halt, but instead welcomed such developments. In an interview on 27 March, the Defence Secretary celebrated the rebels’ seizure of Brega, because “it puts them in control of Libya’s oil output and that is a very substantial change in terms of the dynamic internally in that particular situation...”³⁸⁸ It was already clear that military force, whether by design or otherwise, was assisting one side in a civil war.

While the terms of the P3’s ultimatum were clear,³⁸⁹ interpreting Britain’s objectives is more difficult. The evidence reviewed in the preceding chapter illustrated that while the need to prevent large-scale loss of life in Benghazi was the key driver of government decision-making in the build up to the deployment of force, this perceived imperative co-existed alongside a rigid determination to see Gaddafi’s removal from power, especially on the part of the Prime Minister. This latter position was reinforced by an unstated but widespread assumption that such an outcome was the likely culmination of ongoing events on the ground, so long as the regime was denied the ability to fully utilise its military assets against its opponents. Fox captured this assumption in the interview referred to above, saying “there is no doubt that we’ve given a fillip to the rebels, that they have increased confidence, and I hope that what will ultimately happen is that without further bloodshed the people of Libya will rise up and be able to determine what sort of government they want and to control their own destiny and not have it inflicted upon them by a very vicious regime indeed.”³⁹⁰ That such an eventuality did not

³⁸⁶ HC Deb, 28/03/2011, c. 42.

³⁸⁷ For useful analysis of this point, *see* ICG, “Making Sense of Libya,” ii.

³⁸⁸ MOD, “Dr Fox – Operations in Libya are About Protecting Civilians,” 28 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dr-fox-operations-in-libya-are-about-protecting-civilians>

³⁸⁹ P3 is shorthand for “Permanent Three.” It is used to refer to the three Western governments with permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

emerge following the liberation of Benghazi elevated the salience of questions about the relationship between regime change and civilian protection and brought to the fore widespread concerns about the apparent lack of an “exit strategy” and the possibility of “mission creep.”³⁹¹

There are four key sources of evidence that can be drawn upon to assess and interpret the government’s objectives in its continuing use of force in Libya. The first and most abundant source of evidence is the public statements made by ministers throughout this period. The government sought to emphasise firstly, that it was acting entirely within the remit of the UN resolution and secondly, that its use of force was premised on a distinction between military and political objectives. The government was therefore clear in acknowledging that while providing a broad authorisation for the use of force, the UN resolution also limited what was possible.

Aside from ruling out an occupation force, 1973 also ruled out using military power to orchestrate regime change. Despite his previous insistence on the necessity of Gaddafi’s departure, in his first statement to the House at the outset of the campaign, the Prime Minister recognised that 1973 “explicitly does not provide legal authority to bring about Gaddafi’s removal by military means.”³⁹² The government also strongly emphasised the importance of acting in accordance with the UN resolution and retaining the legal, diplomatic and moral authority that stemmed from that mandate. Hague was especially persistent in reaffirming the importance of this, telling Parliament that, “whatever we do... must be in strict accordance with the UN resolution and we must maintain the legal, moral and international authority that comes from that. We will not do anything that we think would transgress that resolution.”³⁹³

The message intended was that the UK’s military objectives were limited to the narrower purpose of protecting civilians.

³⁹¹ These concerns were raised in Parliament as early as 24 March. *See* HC Deb, 24/03/2011 cc. 1113-1131. *See also* HC Deb, 28/03/2011, cc. 33-51.

³⁹² HC Deb, 21/03/2011, c. 713.

³⁹³ HC Deb, 24/03/2011, c. 1119.

This did not mean, however, that the government backtracked from openly championing regime change in Libya. Instead, the government claimed that its “political” objectives remained unchanged and by drawing a distinction between military and political objectives it could continue to insist that its use of force was consistent with the UN resolution. This ambiguous dual position was the major recurring theme in the government’s public announcements during this period. When the Commons voted to support military action on 21 March, Cameron informed MPs that:

Many people will ask questions—I am sure, today—about regime change, Gaddafi and the rest of it. I have been clear: I think Libya needs to get rid of Gaddafi. But, in the end, we are responsible for trying to enforce that Security Council resolution; the Libyans must choose their own future.³⁹⁴

A few days later, at a press conference following an EU summit, the Prime Minister again spoke of the “constraints” contained in the resolution, before telling the assembled journalists that:

However that does not change my belief – and a belief that has also been expressed by almost every leading of every major country in the world – that there is no future for Libya with Gaddafi and that he should go. I think we need to be clear about those two things; what is in the UN Security Council and what we believe, as leaders, needs to happen.³⁹⁵

This position was shared with Britain’s key alliance partners. It was set out by Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy in a joint letter to the New York Times on 14 April:

Our duty and our mandate under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and we are doing that. It is not to remove Qaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Qaddafi in power.

³⁹⁴ HC Deb, 21/03/2011, c. 701.

³⁹⁵ Prime Minister’s Office, “Press Conference at European Council,” 25 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/press-conference-at-european-council>

The article then reiterated the same terms that the three leaders had first outlined a month previously, before declaring that:

However, so long as Qaddafi is in power, NATO must maintain its operations so that civilians remain protected and the pressure on the regime builds. Then a genuine transition from dictatorship to an inclusive constitutional process can really begin, led by a new generation of leaders. In order for that transition to succeed, Qaddafi must go and go for good.³⁹⁶

Regardless of whatever technical distinction might have existed between military and political objectives, it was natural and logical to see military force as an instrument that would facilitate political change. Cameron let this manner of thinking slip in his testimony before the Liaison Committee in May. Responding to a question about how Britain would narrow the gap between its “political” and “military” objectives, he argued that what was needed was “turning up the pressure.”³⁹⁷ The Prime Minister listed a range of actions Britain was taking in this regard, such as sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Importantly though, he also referred to military action within this context, telling committee members that “you have seen a ramping up of the pressure, within the rule of 1973...”³⁹⁸ Such an admission made clear that military action was seen as making an important contribution to the government’s wider political objectives.

These wider political objectives were ambitious and idealistic. The contemporary public record provides ample evidence that while British policy desired the protection of civilians, policy-makers also sought what they regarded as a just solution to the conflict. Crucially, this latter goal entailed a democratic political system and “accountability” for the crimes of Gaddafi and his senior acolytes. This is clear from some of the comments quoted above, and the references to allowing Libyans to “determine their own future.” In general it did not need spelling out, as it was taken for granted within the government that the protection of civilians was simply one component of a much broader agenda. Summing up the government’s approach before the

³⁹⁶ Barack Obama, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, “Libya’s Pathway to Peace,” *The New York Times*, 14 April 2011.

³⁹⁷ Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” HC-608-ii, 17 May 2011, Ev. 37.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Defence Committee at the end of April, Fox explained that, “the UK aims, if I may begin with those, are for the protection of civilians, for Gaddafi to comply with UN Resolution 1973 and for the Libyan people to have the opportunity to choose their own future.”³⁹⁹ When it was observed that this latter goal was not in fact included in the terms of the resolution, Fox replied by suggesting that, “but I would have thought that a very clear aim for all of us is that the free decision of people to determine their own future is something that we would want to see. I would have hardly thought that required incorporation into the Resolution; I would have thought that to an extent it was self-evident.”⁴⁰⁰

The second key source of evidence is the subsequent testimony of senior members of the government before the FAC’s inquiry in 2015. In certain respects, this evidence is consistent with the contemporary claim that military force was deployed primarily for civilian protection. When asked why military action continued following the liberation of Benghazi, both Hague and Fox pointed to the continuing actions of the Gaddafi regime in threatening civilians in other areas of the country.⁴⁰¹ Fox persisted with the distinction between political and military objectives, recalling how “I think the political view was taken that somebody else had to be in charge. But there was never a plan for regime change as such.”⁴⁰² Hague was able to avoid addressing these issues quite so explicitly, but on the question of regime change, he asserted that “... it is highly likely that western democracies will say that, whatever is going on in UN resolutions or military action, a leader that is butchering his own people has to go. It would be quite surprising if we said anything else.”⁴⁰³ Both former ministers stuck to the official line, and neither was willing to suggest that their contemporary statements, despite their ambiguities, were in any way misrepresenting actual UK policy in Libya.

The testimony of Lord Richards would appear to contradict the claims made by Hague and Fox. In his testimony, Richards was very explicit in conceding that removing Gaddafi was the goal

³⁹⁹ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 1 December 2015, Q. 154-157.

⁴⁰² FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 242.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., Q. 278.

of military action, noting that, “I would say that by April... we were all focused on regime change.”⁴⁰⁴ What Richards’ testimony suggests, however, is that Britain’s initial goals were more limited and that while regime change quickly became the goal, this was only in order to continue fulfilling the civilian protection mandate, rather than something that was pursued as an end in itself. Summarizing his recollection of this change of approach, he acknowledged that, “... 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.”⁴⁰⁵

However, at other times Richards has suggested that getting rid of Gaddafi was an explicit goal from the outset. He suggested that even during the evacuation stage of operations, discussions about Gaddafi were being held and that:

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?’ ... 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 loss of life.’⁴⁰⁶

This evidence would seem to suggest that if there ever was a change of mission, then this change took place before April, during the very earliest round of military action over Benghazi. The claim that this change occurred only in order to protect civilians is also complicated by Richards’ revelations about the British military’s original campaign plan. This plan initially entailed a “pause” after the establishment of the no-fly zone and the operation to halt the regime’s advance on Benghazi. Richards justified the inclusion of a “pause” because “I felt that my political masters and those in American and Europe should at least have an opportunity

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., Q. 311.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., Q. 317.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., Q. 332.

to pause, perhaps have a ceasefire and have another go at the political process...’’⁴⁰⁷ Richards is not entirely consistent when explaining how and why such an option was not in fact taken up, suggesting a number of reasons, but noting that ‘‘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.’’⁴⁰⁸ In addition to noting that the plan did not get much traction in London, Richards jumps between differing explanations for the failure to exploit this possibility, claiming that as the momentum was then with the rebel forces, ‘‘they didn’t feel the need to stop anyway,’’⁴⁰⁹ that the British campaign plan was ‘‘not accepted by our allies,’’⁴¹⁰ and because ‘‘it was clear that Gaddafi was not going to pack up.’’⁴¹¹ It is unclear which of these three explanations he sees as most worthy of emphasis, and it is likely the three were impossible to disentangle. Nevertheless, it suggests that other, non-military means of ending the conflict were not pursued as seriously as they might have been, a point returned to in more detail in the third section of this chapter.

Richards’ memoir, somewhat at odds with the account he provided before the FAC’s inquiry, does not appear to broker a meaningful distinction between military and political goals, nor does it suggest that Britain sought regime change if only to best protect civilians. Instead, while not addressing these issues explicitly, the entire narrative is written as if answers to such questions can be taken for granted. It appears that from the perspective of Britain’s senior military representative, the major goal was to win the conflict by assisting one side in a civil war. He concludes his assessment of the campaign by describing it as a success because, ‘‘... in the end, we got our man.’’⁴¹² He also relates how there was ‘‘considerable political pressure’’ to target Gaddafi directly, because politicians viewed this as a ‘‘quick route to finishing off his regime.’’⁴¹³ Richards’ objections to this approach, which were reported in the media as early as

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., Q. 315.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., Q. 322.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., Q. 317.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., Q. 319.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., Q. 340.

⁴¹² Richards, *Taking Command*, 318

⁴¹³ Ibid., 316.

21 March 2011,⁴¹⁴ were based on his desire to ensure the actions of the Armed Forces were consistent with international law.⁴¹⁵

The memoirs of key individuals within the Obama administration would also seem to suggest that military force was being used for the purpose of regime change. Clinton was already thinking in these terms at the G8 Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 14 March. She describes her meeting in Paris with head of the Benghazi-based rebel NTC, Mahmoud Jibril, by writing that, "we had learned the hard way in Iraq and elsewhere that it's one thing to remove a dictator and another altogether to help a competent and credible government take his place. If the United States was going to intervene in Libya, we would be making a big bet on this political scientist and his colleagues..."⁴¹⁶ Gates recalls in his memoirs the distinction between political and military objectives, yet that is only a recollection of his comments before a Congressional Hearing.⁴¹⁷ Elsewhere, he has more or less admitted that such distinctions were purely cosmetic.⁴¹⁸ In June he was succeeded as defence secretary by former CIA chief Leon Panetta, who in his account of this period recalls letting slip to a journalist "what we couldn't officially acknowledge: that our goal in Libya was regime change."⁴¹⁹ Only General Stavridis, who was NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe at this time, offers a subtly different perspective. He states explicitly that, "we were not authorised to do everything necessary to ensure regime change because that was not our mission."⁴²⁰ While such a claim may have been technically true, the admiral goes on to describe how NATO was trying to assist rebel forces and how this involved individual countries providing arms to them.⁴²¹ Taken together, the evidence from the memoirs suggests that the division between political and military goals was emphasised for

⁴¹⁴ Patrick Wintour and Ewen MacAskill, "Is Muammar Gaddafi a Target? PM and Military Split Over War Aims," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/21/muammar-gaddafi-david-cameron-libya>

⁴¹⁵ Richards, *Taking Command*, 317.

⁴¹⁶ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 370.

⁴¹⁷ Gates, *Duty*, 520-521.

⁴¹⁸ Becker and Shane, "Libya Gamble Part 1."

⁴¹⁹ Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 354.

⁴²⁰ Stavridis, *Accidental Admiral*, 57.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

legal and diplomatic reasons and while it led to the placing of some restrictions on the way in which force could be used, it did not automatically mean that such force was not perceived as helping to facilitate objectives that went beyond the UN resolution.

As is implicit in the arguments above, a final means of assessing Britain's objectives in Libya is by inferring the intentions from the manner in which force was used. The tactics and capabilities utilised are analysed in greater detail in the following sections of this chapter. The insertion of special forces to help assist rebel advances in the summer of 2011 is a tactic that strongly suggests a policy of military regime change. This development, however, does not rule out the possibility that the initial goals were more narrowly defined or that regime change, as some have suggested, may have been pursued precisely because it became the only way of protecting civilians.⁴²² The difficulty here is that we are entering far more subjective territory. Even before the full commencement of Operation Unified Protector on 31 March, the actions taken by the US, Britain and France were interpreted by many at the time as efforts to assist one side in a civil war and remove Gaddafi through force.⁴²³ It is certainly true that the use of allied airpower facilitated territorial gains by the rebel side in late March, and certainly the case, as Richards reveals, that Cameron and others favoured targeting Gaddafi personally, as a quick means of achieving their goals.⁴²⁴

It is far from certain that continuing military action was a last resort. During the early stages of the campaign, the government adopted a dismissive attitude toward the possibility of diplomatic negotiation. Cameron bypassed directly addressing questions about reports of Turkey's attempts to find a diplomatic solution when this was raised in Parliament, claiming that while Ankara might potentially have a role as a "trusted interlocutor," their immediate priority should be the provision of naval assets to support ongoing operations.⁴²⁵ Similarly, Hague

⁴²² This position is consistent with Richards' evidence before the FAC. For a similar line of reasoning, see Ralph, "Liberal State," 16.

⁴²³ For relevant examples, see HC Deb, 28/03/2011, cc. 33-51; HC Deb, 30/03/2011, cc. 345-366.

⁴²⁴ Bell and Witter, *Libyan Intervention Part 3*, 13-16.

⁴²⁵ HC Deb, 28/03/2011, c. 42.

sought to present reports of Greek mediation efforts not as an initiative that might potentially lead to a negotiated end to the conflict, but as “a sign of the pressure that the regime is under.”⁴²⁶ A series of comments by the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson, between late March and early April, were quite explicit in making clear that Britain was not involved in any of the reported efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, had no intention of brokering an exit for Gaddafi, and was not contemplating waiving accountability in order to use this as a diplomatic bargaining chip.⁴²⁷

The distinction between civilian protection and various other objectives is as much a conceptual issue as it is an empirical one. However, the evidence reviewed in this section suggests that Britain’s objectives went beyond a desire to protect civilians and included regime change and democratic transition. Although the latter goals were seen in part as a means of removing the threat to civilians, they were also valued as an end in themselves as they represented what the government took to be a just and legitimate solution to the conflict. Secondly, the distinction between political and military objectives rested more in the realm of legal niceties than political realities. The UN resolution did impose restrictions on the way in which force could be used and military leaders were not given *carte blanche* to remove Gaddafi from power. Yet the legal obstacles to pursuing the objectives do not alter the nature of the objectives themselves and policy-makers naturally viewed military action as a means of facilitating the realization of their wider political goals. Finally, while there was some uncertainty and confusion over the legal interpretation of the resolution and a temporary absence of unanimity within government about what exactly would follow the first stage of the operations, there is little evidence to support the contention that there was a fundamental change of mission. It is more realistic to conclude that democratic regime change was, at the very least, a latent objective from the outset of the

⁴²⁶ HC Deb, 04/04/2011, c. 756.

⁴²⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, “Morning Press Briefing,” 28 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-28-march-2011>; Prime Minister’s Office, “Morning Press Briefing,” 30 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-30-march-2011>; Prime Minister’s Office, “Morning Press Briefing,” 4 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-4-april-2011>

intervention, even if the immediate priority was the establishment of a no-fly zone and the liberation of Benghazi. This did not mean that there existed a secret plan to oust Gaddafi. Rather, the British government began the campaign optimistically viewing both Gaddafi's total defeat and a process of democratic regime change as the natural byproduct of its intervention and therefore continued to pursue the military option for as long as this agenda remained incomplete.

The Anaconda Strategy

By April, the situation on the ground clearly indicated that neither side was capable of a decisive breakthrough. Notwithstanding minor territorial gains, and the importance of the liberation of Misrata in May, this stalemate would continue until late July and early August. The British strategy was referred to by Hague as the ‘‘anaconda strategy’’⁴²⁸ and it involved steadily tightening the pressure against Gaddafi through diplomatic isolation, economic strangulation and ongoing military attacks. The failure of the rebels to achieve a breakthrough on the eastern front and the ability of the Gaddafi regime to retain control in the capital and much of Tripolitania threatened to erode the political and diplomatic support for continuing military action and made clear that a no-fly zone and air strikes against regime forces were an insufficient means of toppling Gaddafi. At the same time, there were legitimate doubts about whether the alliance had the capability to sustain its operations beyond September. This patient and sometimes constrained use of military force, at least when measured against the scale of the objectives described in the preceding section, was ultimately an insufficient route to victory. This section explains how and why Britain adopted such an approach, analyses the measured escalations adopted during this period, and assesses the constraints that prevented a more decisive use of force.

The anaconda strategy required patience and persistence in recognition of the fact that the swift rebel victory that some may have been hoping for was not to be forthcoming. It was reported

⁴²⁸ Wintour and Watt, ‘‘Cameron’s Libyan War.’’

that Hague warned the cabinet at the end of April that, ‘‘we might have to prepare for the long haul.’’⁴²⁹ When asked in Parliament to justify this approach, the Foreign Secretary told the Commons that ‘‘the point that I made at the Cabinet this morning was that in this situation, time is not on the side of Gaddafi. We are often asked in international conflicts whether time is on our side. We should be confident that in this situation—given this coalition, this range of sanctions and these intensifying efforts—time is not on the side of Gaddafi, and the members of his regime need to know that.’’⁴³⁰ This argument was a recurring theme in the weeks and months ahead and was drawn upon by the government to address concerns about the difficulties of sustaining military operations indefinitely. In Prime Minister’s Questions in June, for example, Cameron responded to the doubters by declaring that ‘‘I want one simple message to go out from every part of the Government, and indeed from every part of the House of Commons: time is on our side. We have NATO, the United Nations and the Arab League. We have right on our side. The pressure is building militarily, diplomatically and politically, and time is running out for Gaddafi.’’⁴³¹

It is often difficult to interpret the public statements for this period as the demands of maintaining a united front and delivering the necessary signals to Gaddafi often prevented ministers speaking truthfully about the challenges they were facing. For example, when Fox appeared before the Defence Committee in April, he began by informing its members that ‘‘the messages that come out of this session this afternoon will resonate with our Forces and with the Gaddafi regime,’’ and finished the session by announcing that ‘‘we are, I hope, sending a very clear signal today, from this Committee to the regime in Libya, that we intend to fulfil our obligations under the UN Resolution.’’⁴³² The government therefore studiously avoided acknowledging the situation had reached a stalemate, preferring instead to describe the situation

⁴²⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Morning Press Briefing,’’ 26 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-26-april-2011>; Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Afternoon Press Briefing,’’ 26 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-afternoon-from-26-april-2011>.

⁴³⁰ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 41.

⁴³¹ HC Deb, 15/06/2011, c. 777

⁴³² Defence Committee, ‘‘Operations in Libya,’’ Ev. 1-13.

as fluid and emphasising that time was against Gaddafi. A more emphatic demonstration of the importance of this political messaging came in June, when Cameron responded to public comments by the First Sea Lord casting doubt on Britain's ability to sustain the operations indefinitely. "You do the fighting, I'll do the talking," was the Prime Minister's response.⁴³³

Privately, the government's strategy also rested on a heavy emphasis on defection and an assumption that this was a viable route to regime change. This underlined the importance of the messages that Cameron and Fox were reinforcing, as any hint of a change of course would encourage Gaddafi and those around him to continue the fight. Britain scored an early victory in this area, with the high-profile defection of Libya's then foreign minister, Musa Kusa, who arrived at Farnborough Airport on 31 March. This was celebrated as a major triumph and a sign of the regime's growing weakness, and Cameron declared that "I've been clear from the start that we want Gaddafi to go and that his henchmen should also come to their senses and abandon this brutal regime."⁴³⁴ This partially explains the importance attached to promises of accountability, the threat of which was often presented as an incentive for would-be deserters. When the ICC issued arrest warrants for Gaddafi in June, Hague offered this as one of the arguments in favour of supporting judicial action, telling Parliament that "we cannot provide certainty, but these warrants show an ever-increasing risk to supporters of the regime of facing that accountability, so more of them should take the opportunity to leave it."⁴³⁵

According to Mark Muller Stuart, a prominent lawyer and civil society activist who met with senior members of the government during this period, this approach was based on the Foreign Office's analysis of Libya's internal dynamics, which held that the regime's survival depended on the continued loyalty of a select number of important families.⁴³⁶ If these could be persuaded to abandon the regime then, according to the calculations of the FCO, the regime would

⁴³³ Prime Minister's Office, "PM's Press Conference on Sentencing Reforms," 21 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-press-conference-on-sentencing-reforms>

⁴³⁴ Prime Minister's Office, "Turkish Prime Minister Press Conference," 1 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-from-1-april-2011>

⁴³⁵ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 965.

⁴³⁶ Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, 37-38%.

collapse from within.⁴³⁷ From this perspective, a stalemate was seen as less problematic, as it might be interpreted as a precursor to the significant defections the government was hoping for. On the one occasion Hague implicitly acknowledged that there was a stalemate, he offered the view that “I think even the prospect of a kind of stalemate that you’re talking about could encourage people in Tripoli to think well Colonel Gaddafi has now got to go.”⁴³⁸

This approach naturally relied heavily on alliance unity. It was arguably this factor that served as the single greatest check against a more decisive use of force at an earlier stage. As some politicians began to call for a steeper escalation in the military effort to break the apparent stalemate, Hague outlined the preferred approach with the argument that, ‘it is more important to stick to the resolutions, and to achieve success within their constraints, than to expect a lack of support among the nations of the coalition for our action in continuing these operations as necessary, along without our other diplomatic and economic efforts.’⁴³⁹ Already in April, NATO actions were provoking a backlash at the UN, as some members interpreted military action as clearly exceeding the mandate that had been granted and likely to promote continued conflict. Hardeep Singh Puri, who was India’s Permanent Representative during this period, describes a “sharp exchange” between himself and his British counterpart, Mark Lyall Grant, over their contrasting interpretations of Britain’s involvement in the conflict.⁴⁴⁰ Britain did not have military capabilities to achieve its goal without a broad coalition, but more importantly the legitimacy of the action and therefore the ability to sustain it depended on widespread international support, in addition to the continuing approval of the Arab states. The diplomatic effort therefore took place on two fronts, the one within NATO and the other with the Arab states. Alliance unity was fragile.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Discusses Libya and Cote d’Ivoire,” 3 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-discusses-libya-and-cote-d-ivoire>

⁴³⁹ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 45.

⁴⁴⁰ Hardeep Singh Puri, *Perilous Interventions; The Security Council and the Politics of Chaos* (India: Harper Collins, 2016), Kindle, Ch. 3.

A meeting in Paris on 19 March, prior to the scheduled commencement of military action, was intended to strengthen alliance unity, but it ended without any agreement on what would follow the initial US-led phase of the operation. Furthermore, the pre-emptive and unilateral actions of the French government, which decided to commence air strikes before the agreed time, provoked a backlash. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi even threatened to withdraw access to his country's bases, a move that would be especially difficult for Britain given the lack of an aircraft carrier.⁴⁴¹ The major point of contention within the fragile alliance during this early stage was the issue of command and control.⁴⁴² Britain and the US both favoured a NATO takeover as soon as possible, as the alliance's command and control capabilities were deemed necessary to a mission of this kind. Fearing Turkish obstruction and doubtful whether Arab states would participate under NATO's banner, the French favoured joint Anglo-Franco leadership instead. The divisions were so acrimonious that French representatives stormed out of a meeting in Brussels on 21 March. NATO belatedly assumed full control of the mission under Operation Unified Protect on 31 March. Similarly, there were early indications that the diplomatic support from the region would quickly disintegrate. On 20 March, the Secretary General of the Arab League cast doubt on the prospect of the League's continued support by suggesting that military action was already exceeding what had been called for.⁴⁴³ The UAE, having promised to participate in operations, threatened to reverse this commitment in response to what it perceived as US criticism of the GCC's intervention in Bahrain.⁴⁴⁴ These initial divisions were healed, but they attest to the difficulties of managing such a broad coalition and highlight a wide divergence of views on the wisdom and purpose of intervening in Libya, even among those countries that Britain could expect to call on as close allies.

⁴⁴¹ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 373.

⁴⁴² For a good overview of these divisions and disagreements, see Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 4 and Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 373-375.

⁴⁴³ Edward Cody, "Arab League Condemns Broad Bombing Campaign in Libya," *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-league-condemns-broad-bombing-campaign-in-libya/2011/03/20/AB1pSg1_story.html?utm_term=.e394bdf62fd1

⁴⁴⁴ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 373.

Following the “London Conference” on 31 March,⁴⁴⁵ the first meeting of the newly formed “Contact Group” was jointly chaired by Britain and Qatar in Doha on 13 April.⁴⁴⁶ While NATO would lead the military campaign, the purpose of this diplomatic grouping was to sustain support for the wider political goals of regime change and democratic transition. This was the primary vehicle for the demonstration of the international community’s continued resolve in confronting Gaddafi. The members of this group reiterated their commitment to continue enforcing the resolutions through military action, issued calls for Gaddafi to leave power and stepped up their level of both practical and political support for the rebel National Transitional Council. Although there had been widespread support for intervening to prevent the fall of Benghazi, and widespread hostility to Gaddafi, this did not mean that Britain and France had a free hand with which to dispatch him. If diplomatic support had helped make military action possible, it also meant that Britain could not so easily close the gap between its political goals and the means available for their fulfilment without unsettling the very alliance upon which the whole legitimacy of the mission depended.

Despite this diplomatic context, the government generally adopted a broad and liberal interpretation of the resolution, using it to authorise actions that while perhaps technically consistent with the UN mandate, were arguably in violation of its spirit. Paragraph four of Resolution 1973, with its “all necessary measures” clause, was open to more than one

⁴⁴⁵ FCO, “UK Convenes London Conference on Libya,” 27 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-convenes-london-conference-on-libya>; FCO, “The London Conference on Libya: Attendees,” 29 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-london-conference-on-libya-attendees>; FCO, “London Conference on Libya: Chair’s Statement,” 29 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-conference-on-libya-chairs-statement>; David Cameron, “Speech at the London Conference on Libya,” 29 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-london-conference-on-libya>.

⁴⁴⁶ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Attends First Meeting of Libya Contact Group,” 13 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-attends-first-meeting-of-libya-contact-group>; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Sets Out UK Aims for Libya Contact Group,” 13 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-sets-out-uk-aims-for-libya-contact-group>; FCO “Libya Contact Group: Chair’s Statement,” 13 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/libya-contact-group-chairs-statement>

interpretation.⁴⁴⁷ As to whether the resolution authorised attacks on military assets not engaged in fighting, the British government quickly adopted the position that it did. Britain would target not simply those assets that were being deployed in the ongoing conflict but would use paragraph four as a legal justification for targeting any and all military assets possessed by the Gaddafi regime. The Prime Minister first implicitly defended this position on 28 March, in response to the questioning of the bombing of a munitions dump in the desert.⁴⁴⁸ This meant the intention behind many of the strikes was to erode the military capability of the regime, ostensibly in the name of protecting civilians, but with the obvious advantage that such an interpretation of the resolution would ultimately assist one side in a civil war. Fox acknowledged as much before the Defence Committee, stating that ‘‘if we want to change the equilibrium none the less, the way to do that is to degrade the regime.’’⁴⁴⁹

An even more controversial question was whether or not Gaddafi himself was a legitimate target. Richards emphatically ruled this out on 21 March, publicly stating that Gaddafi was not a legal target under the terms of the resolution.⁴⁵⁰ The fact that Richards was quickly reprimanded by Number 10, and the fact that ministers generally sought to avoid explicitly denying that Gaddafi was a target, attests to the fact that the government was operating in a grey zone.⁴⁵¹ Cameron announced in Prime Minister’s Questions the following day, ‘‘I do not propose to give a running commentary on targets,’’ a line that ministers stuck to in the weeks and months ahead.⁴⁵² For example, when Hague was given the opportunity to rule out targeting Gaddafi, he repeated this position, telling MPs that ‘‘we will not go into it.’’⁴⁵³ The official

⁴⁴⁷ For a useful summary of some of these issues, see Ben Smith and Arabella Thorp, ‘‘Interpretation of Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya,’’ House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN/IA/5916, 6 April 2011.

⁴⁴⁸ HC Deb 28/03/2011, c. 41.

⁴⁴⁹ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 5.

⁴⁵⁰ James Kirkup, Robert Winnett and Alex Spillius, ‘‘Libya: Target Gaddafi – War of Words over Next Phase,’’ *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8396946/Libya-target-Gaddafi-war-of-words-over-next-phase.html>

⁴⁵¹ Richards, *Taking Command*, 316.

⁴⁵² HC Deb, 23/03/2011, c. 943.

⁴⁵³ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 44.

position was that targeting command and control centres was legally permitted, and if Gaddafi or other senior members of the regime happened to be present then that was coincidental. When explaining what was encompassed within the government's definition of command and control, the Prime Minister explained that it included both "the organization and the people within it who are ordering the killing of civilians."⁴⁵⁴ Another legally difficult area was the interpretation of the arms embargo installed under the previous resolution. Reflecting the difficulties surrounding this question, the Defence Secretary appeared to confirm that arming the opposition would in fact be illegal.⁴⁵⁵ However, the government quickly backtracked from this, claiming that while this embargo applied to the whole of Libya, it might be argued that "all necessary measures" permitted an exemption that would allow the supply of rebel forces.⁴⁵⁶ Publicly at least, the government was leaving its options open by suggesting that arming the rebels might be legal, but that was separate from the question of whether or not it was advisable.

If the British government might have disregarded the spirit of Resolution 1973 by seeking to use it as a vehicle for a wider political change in Libya, this did not mean that it ignored international law. This was one area in which key players within the government were determined to draw a line under the presumed mistakes of previous conflicts. Although the analysis in the remainder of this chapter shows that military action went beyond what would be called for even under a liberal interpretation of the UN mandate, Britain still observed significant legal constraints, particularly during the earlier stages of the campaign. The Coalition government adhered to more formal decision-making processes than the "sofa style" of the Blair period, and the presence of the Attorney General or other relevant legal representation at NSC meetings was consistent throughout. The NSC's Libya committee (NSC(L)), described in a subsequent review of its processes as "the central forum for collective discussion of the government's objectives on Libya and for their delivery," met 62 times during

⁴⁵⁴ Liaison Committee, "Oral Evidence," 17 May 2011, 38.

⁴⁵⁵ MoD, "Operations in Libya."

⁴⁵⁶ HC Deb, 30/03/2011, c. 333-334.

the conflict.⁴⁵⁷ The Attorney General attended 39 of these meetings, the Solicitor General 14 meetings, and representatives of the Attorney General's Office (AGO) were present at three meetings.⁴⁵⁸ On occasion, this appears to have created greater frustration than was initially anticipated, particularly for the Prime Minister. In one incident, Cameron grew especially frustrated that the sanctions introduced in Resolution 1970 prevented him from authorising an airlift of Libyan banknotes to support rebel forces.⁴⁵⁹

The willingness to accept some of the constraints imposed by international law was also a pragmatic concession to the needs of alliance unity that were analysed above. Hague repeatedly emphasised the need to act within the terms of the resolution, but in doing so he typically rested his argument less on a principled commitment to the law and more upon the fact that continued compliance would ensure legitimacy in the eyes of world opinion and maintain diplomatic support. On 7 June, responding to concerns about the failure to make available frozen assets to the NTC, the Foreign Secretary stated in Parliament that “it is very important that we stay within the UN resolutions and retain the moral authority of operating within international law, even though that is inconvenient in some respects and requires us to do some things differently from how we might wish. So that is a higher priority than finding a way around the UN resolutions. If it is possible to change them at any stage, we would be ready to do so.”⁴⁶⁰

Targeting command and control centres was one thing, openly instructing military leaders to remove Gaddafi by force was not possible, a situation that created some difficulty given the objectives described above. A meeting of NATO defence ministers on 14 April provided slightly clearer objectives by giving military leaders a list of targets and territories that regime

⁴⁵⁷ Prime Minister's Office, *Libya Crisis: National Security Adviser's Review of Central Co-ordination and Lessons Learned*, 2013, 6.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁹ D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 172; Wintour and Watt, “Cameron's Libyan War.”

⁴⁶⁰ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 47.

forces were required to withdraw his forces from. It could not, however, *explicitly* authorise the overthrow of Gaddafi.⁴⁶¹

A further constraint emerged from the need to limit civilian casualties. In comparison with previous campaigns, NATO and its partners were successful in keeping these to a minimum.⁴⁶² This was possible because of technology such as precision guided munitions, but it was primarily the result of a “strategic decision.”⁴⁶³ Fox took the decision, without properly consulting Number 10, to set targeting policy at a level where it was judged that there was zero percent probability of collateral damage, a decision that the Prime Minister described as “fucking ridiculous” when he discovered it.⁴⁶⁴ In certain situations, it proved a constraint on the RAF’s ability to protect civilians, never mind assist in rebel victories against Gaddafi’s forces. In one early instance, the RAF aborted a mission and the Tornados were forced to return to Marham, after civilians were observed in the vicinity of their target.⁴⁶⁵ This constraint was arguably more difficult as the conflict moved into its second month, with Gaddafi’s forces switching tactics and blending in with civilians and rebel militias more effectively. It was especially difficult in the battle for Misrata, a focus of RAF activity during this period, as Gaddafi’s forces were often dug in in areas close to civilians.⁴⁶⁶

There were two related arguments for this position. Avoiding civilian casualties would help in the war of narratives against Gaddafi, ensuring that Britain retained the moral authority. Hague set out this position from the outset, telling Parliament that “we retain the moral and

⁴⁶¹ NATO, “Statement on Libya,” 14 April 2011, https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_72544.htm

⁴⁶² There were less than 60 such casualties for UOP. See Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 8 and Elizabeth Quintana, “The War From the Air,” in *Short War, Long Shadow; The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libyan Campaign*, eds. Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012), 34-35.

⁴⁶³ MOD, “UK Forces’ Contribution to Libya Campaign,” 27 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-forces-contribution-to-libya-campaign>

⁴⁶⁴ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 176-177.

⁴⁶⁵ Con Coughlin, “Libya: Abortive Raid Lets Allies Keep Moral High Ground,” *The Telegraph*, 21 March 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8397233/Libya-abortive-raid-lets-Allies-keep-moral-high-ground.html>

⁴⁶⁶ HC Deb, 04/04/2011, c. 764.

international standing, particularly because of the extreme care we take to minimise – to avoid – civilian casualties.’⁴⁶⁷ When interviewed on the BBC in June, the Foreign Secretary responded to the argument that this approach was prolonging the conflict by referring to the importance of sticking to the UN resolutions and retaining the moral authority that came from that position.⁴⁶⁸ Furthermore, politicians saw this as contributing to the wider goal of restoring the damage to Britain’s moral authority after Iraq. From Fox’s perspective, this was one of the means of ‘exorcising the ghost of Iraq.’⁴⁶⁹ Yet Fox was also correct in identifying a second key reason for this strategy, telling the Defence Committee in that, ‘‘apart from the argument of being on the high moral ground and having a higher respect for life than Gaddafi clearly does, it has also been essential in maintaining the coalition internationally, not least with the Arab countries, that we have shown that respect for minimising civilian casualties.’’⁴⁷⁰ As with the commitment to uphold international law, the determination to limit civilian casualties was also a natural by-product of the necessity of alliance unity.

It is widely acknowledged that the Libya campaign exposed fundamental capabilities gaps within NATO and a critical reliance on the US. Although both Britain and France contributed to the initial US-led Operation Odyssey Dawn, it was a preponderance of US military power that quickly secured the no-fly zone. The British contribution to this effort was rather modest. Data provided by the Pentagon records that the coalition flew a total of 1,602 sorties in the period up until 28 March, with the US providing 983 of these.⁴⁷¹ In a statement to the House of Commons on 28 March, the Prime Minister announced that the RAF had flown a total of 120 sorties.⁴⁷² When taken together with the Pentagon’s data, this would suggest the UK flew little over 7% of the sorties during the most crucial period of military action. In the period up until 28 March the

⁴⁶⁷ HC Deb, 30/03/2011, c. 365.

⁴⁶⁸ FCO, ‘‘Foreign Secretary on Libya and Yemen,’’ 5 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-on-libya-and-yemen>

⁴⁶⁹ Wintour and Watt, ‘‘Cameron’s Libyan War.’’

⁴⁷⁰ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 2.

⁴⁷¹ US Department of Defense, ‘‘News Briefing,’’ 28 March 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/briefingslide.aspx?briefingslideid=358>

⁴⁷² HC Deb, 28/03/2011, c. 33.

US Navy launched 192 cruise missiles as part of its effort to put in place a no-fly zone.⁴⁷³ In contrast, the contribution of the Royal Navy amounted to just seven missiles.⁴⁷⁴ Following the transition to NATO command and control at the end of March, the US fulfilled its promise to withdraw from a combat role on 4 April, focusing instead on those unique capabilities that only the it could provide.⁴⁷⁵

This approach was famously and controversially referred to as “leading from behind.”⁴⁷⁶ Yet even with Britain and France occupying political leadership and the US withdrawing from a combat role, the American contribution remained essential. As Fox has subsequently admitted, “Britain simply didn’t have the military capabilities, in terms of air to air refuelling... a lot of the logistics and a lot of the intelligence was all American.”⁴⁷⁷ At its peak, the UK had 2,300 personnel deployed for the Libya operation, 32 aircraft and four ships.⁴⁷⁸ The UK flew over 10% of NATO sorties and 20% of the strike sorties.⁴⁷⁹ The US, however, continued to provide over 75% of the ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities) and to plug shortfalls in refuelling capacity, providing 25 of the 38 tankers that were deployed for Operation Unified Protector (OUP).⁴⁸⁰ The US also had to step in when allies ran out of munitions. Gate writes in his memoirs that, “just three months into the campaign, we had to resupply even our strongest allies with precision-guided bombs and missiles – they had

⁴⁷³ Department of Defense, “News Briefing.”

⁴⁷⁴ MOD, “Libya Update,” 20 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/libya-update--2>; MOD, “Updated: British Armed Forces Launch Strike Against Libyan Air Defence Systems,” 20 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/updated-british-armed-forces-launch-strike-against-libyan-air-defence-systems>; MOD, “Operational Update on Libya,” 25 March 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/operational-update-on-libya-25-march>.

⁴⁷⁵ The White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya,” 28 March 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>

⁴⁷⁶ Ryan Lizza, “Leading From Behind,” *The New Yorker*, 26 April 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/leading-from-behind>

⁴⁷⁷ Quoted in Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 274.

⁴⁷⁸ MOD, “End of Libya Operations Announced by NATO,” 27 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-of-libya-operations-announced-by-nato>

⁴⁷⁹ HC Deb, 24/10/2011, c. 25; NATO, “NATO and Libya,” Operational Media Update, 25 October 2011, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_10/20111025_111025-oup-update.pdf

⁴⁸⁰ Bell and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 2*, 28; Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 5

exhausted their meagre supply.’⁴⁸¹ The MOD’s obfuscation in response to questioning adds to the suspicion that Britain was among those suffering from such shortfalls.⁴⁸²

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the government’s austerity program had seen cuts to defence spending. These cuts had the potential to impact the conduct of the Libyan campaign and the decisions made in the defence review were therefore scrutinised in the context of ongoing military operations.⁴⁸³ In May, Air Chief Marshal Sir Simon Bryant, in a private briefing to MPs, claimed that while many had hoped for a swift resolution of the mission, ‘‘should Operation Ellamy endure past defence planning assumptions the future contingent capability is likely to be eroded.’’⁴⁸⁴ More provocative were the public comments by the First Sea Lord, who in mid-June said that if operations were to continue beyond the six-month commitment the navy had planned, then the government would need to make ‘‘challenging decisions.’’⁴⁸⁵ While there was strong bipartisan support for the Libyan mission, Labour leader Ed Miliband seized on these warnings to call for a u-turn on the defence review.⁴⁸⁶ Although the Prime Minister insisted he had sought assurances from the Chief of Defence Staff that Britain could sustain operations indefinitely, such a claim was treated with suspicion.⁴⁸⁷ So too were claims about the financial costs of the operations, which the government optimistically estimated would run to just £260 million.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸¹ Gates, *Duty*, 522.

⁴⁸² See, for example, HC Deb, 03/05/2011, 677W; HC Deb, 09/05/2011, c. 969W; HC Deb, 18/10/2011, c. 875W. It is more likely that the UK was able to address this issue by ordering industry to produce more. See Thomas Harding, ‘‘Success of Missile Leads to Shortage,’’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 2011.

⁴⁸³ See, for example, HC Deb, 24/03/2011, cc. 1113-1131; HC Deb, 16/05/2011, cc. 17-25; HC Deb, 15/06/2011, c. 777.

⁴⁸⁴ Ellamy was the name given to the UK contribution of OUP. Thomas Harding, ‘‘Staying in Libya Will Hit the RAF,’’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2011.

⁴⁸⁵ Nick Hopkins, ‘‘Libya Campaign Cannot be Kept at Current Level, Says Navy Chief: Fighting Beyond Summer Will Need ‘Tough Decisions,’ First Sea Lord Denies There Will be Review of Cuts,’’ *The Guardian*, 14 June 2011.

⁴⁸⁶ HC Deb, 22/06/2011, cc. 314-315.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ HC Deb, 23/06/2011, c. 24WS. For analysis and criticism of the government estimate, see Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, 59; FAC, *Libya: Examination of Intervention*, 26.

Even with taking into account the partisan and bureaucratic politics that was involved in these debates, there is good evidence that Britain's more modest military capabilities and the decisions made in the defence review constituted a tangible constraint on action in Libya. It appears the US withdrawal from a combat role did slow the tempo of operations to some degree, thereby contributing to the stalemate.⁴⁸⁹ NATO requested more countries to contribute to strike operations in mid-April and although Britain twice increased its deployment of Tornados, we can assume that had the government had greater resources at its disposal, more would have been committed. More importantly, there are sound reasons for doubting the government's repeated claims that it could continue these operations indefinitely. According to the planning assumptions outlined in the SDSR, the UK would be able to sustain one "enduring stabilization mission" (i.e. Afghanistan) while simultaneously conducting one "non-enduring complex intervention."⁴⁹⁰ The latter was defined as lasting no longer than six months, suggesting the UK would struggle to sustain operations beyond September. Initially, part of the reason Britain was able to carry out this intervention in spite of the defence review was that many of the decisions were yet to be implemented.⁴⁹¹ Defence analyst Mark Philips argues the main difficulty in sustaining operations beyond September would have been refuelling shortfalls, with the ageing VC-10 being used at a very high rate for this purpose.⁴⁹² Other decisions made in the defence review were temporarily delayed in response to Libya, most notably the decision to delay the retirement of the Nimrod R1 aircraft until June.⁴⁹³

Even if it were realistic to suppose that the government could have defied the warnings of military chiefs, defence analysts and its own planning assumptions, it is even less realistic to

⁴⁸⁹ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 5.

⁴⁹⁰ HM Government, *Strategic Defence and Security Review*, 18-19.

⁴⁹¹ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, 56.

⁴⁹² Mark Philips, "Box 1: How Long Could the Operation Have Been Sustained?" in *Short War, Long Shadow; The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libyan Campaign*, eds. Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012) 39-40.

⁴⁹³ Liaison Committee, "Oral Evidence," HC 608-ii, Ev. 43; MOD, "Nimrod R1 Retires From Service," 7 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nimrod-r1-retires-from-service>. For a full list of capabilities that were used in Libya and were also earmarked to be withdrawn following full implementation of the SDSR see HC Deb, 13/07/2011, c. 368W.

suppose that other members of the alliance could have done so. Italy withdrew its carrier in July in response to domestic financial problems while Norway, which at one stage was providing 10% of NATO sorties, withdrew the last of its F-16s in August.⁴⁹⁴ It might be assumed that the US could have stepped in to bail out its allies, but such an assumption does not take account of the domestic political constraints Obama was facing. Without Congressional approval, the US involvement was effectively capped at its then current level.⁴⁹⁵

It was within the parameters of the various constraints described above, that Britain and France pushed for a series of more measured escalations during this period. The first significant development was the decision to send military advisors. According to a report by Mark Urban, the BBC's diplomatic and defence editor, this decision was made at the end of March.⁴⁹⁶ On 19 April, the government announced the deployment of what it described as a "military liaison advisory team" which would operate alongside the diplomatic mission established in Benghazi.⁴⁹⁷ The primary purpose of these advisors was assisting with headquarters organization, communications and logistics.⁴⁹⁸ According to the available public statements, the team were not involved in providing training or operational advice.⁴⁹⁹ No member of the government has ever confirmed whether these advisors were involved in calling in NATO airstrikes, but informed commentators have typically described this as part of their role.⁵⁰⁰ According to Urban, the government also sanctioned a "train and equip" programme at this early stage, although the fruits of this initiative would take time to materialise.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁴ Claire Taylor, *Military Operations in Libya*, House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN/IA/5909, 24 October 2011, 22-23.

⁴⁹⁵ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 6.

⁴⁹⁶ Mark Urban, "Inside Story of the UK's Secret Mission to Beat Gaddafi," *BBC News Magazine*, 19 January, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16573516>

⁴⁹⁷ MOD, "UK Military Liaison Advisory Team to be Sent to Libya," 19 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-military-liaison-advisory-team-to-be-sent-to-libya>

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid*; HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 34, 42; HC Deb, 03/05/2011, c. 437; Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 5-6.

⁴⁹⁹ MOD, "Military Liaison Advisory Team,"; Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 5.

⁵⁰⁰ Urban, "Inside Story."

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*.

Britain raised its deployment of Tornados from eight to twelve jets on 5 April, contributing to a small increase in the tempo of RAF activity.⁵⁰² Targeting policy changed in mid-May, with a greater emphasis on “strategic targets.”⁵⁰³ This shift was a product of UK strategic analysis and a reflection of greater UK influence over the campaign. It involved not simply degrading the regime’s military capability, but striking targets in order to achieve a desired psychological impact, including the regime’s intelligence network and in line with the policy of encouraging defections.⁵⁰⁴ For example, an MOD briefing on 1 June, describing strikes against Gaddafi’s notorious Bab al-Aziziya complex, noted that “this action sends a powerful message to the regime’s leadership and to those involved in delivering Colonel Gaddafi’s attacks on civilians that they are no longer hidden away from the Libyan people behind high walls.”⁵⁰⁵ At the end of May, a joint UK-French proposal led to the deployment of attack helicopters. The UK decision was announced on 27 May, and Apaches operating from HMS Ocean performed their first aerial attacks over Brega on 4 June.⁵⁰⁶ The four Apache helicopters operating from HMS Ocean flew just 50 aerial missions and carried out only 22 strike sorties.⁵⁰⁷ In public this decision was defended on the basis of allowing greater precision in strikes.⁵⁰⁸ Within government they were seen in the context of the psychological pressure Britain was seeking to build. In the subsequent words of a defence official, they were regarded as a “massive psychological handle to crank up.”⁵⁰⁹

Another key development that took place during this period was the creation of an “oil cell.” The regime still had control of approximately 75-80% of Libyan production capability, and

⁵⁰² Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Visits RAF Libya Crews,” 5 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-visits-raf-libya-crews>

⁵⁰³ Goulter, “The British Experience,” 169-170.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ MOD, “RAF Destroys Gaddafi Ammunition Depot,” 1 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/raf-destroys-gaddafi-ammunition-depot>

⁵⁰⁶ MOD, “Apaches Get Ready to Help Protect Libyan Civilians,” 27 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/apaches-get-ready-to-help-protect-libyan-civilians>; MOD, “Apaches Conduct Operations Over Libya,” 4 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/apaches-conduct-operations-over-libya>

⁵⁰⁷ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 35; Goulter, “The British Experience,” 170.

⁵⁰⁸ HC Deb, 24/05/2011, c. 780.

⁵⁰⁹ Wintour and Watt, “Cameron’s Libyan War.”

continued access to the refinery in Zawiyah ensured that Gaddafi was still well-supplied in spite of the sanctions.⁵¹⁰ The latter were having a perverse effect, by preventing the rebels in the east from selling crude oil and making it impossible for them to access refined products. In his testimony to the FAC's inquiry, Duncan described how he drew upon his previous experience in the oil industry and warned the Prime Minister of the importance of this issue: "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.""⁵¹¹ Cameron responded to Duncan's prompting, and an "oil cell" was established as a cross-Whitehall unit, hosted by the Foreign Office.⁵¹² It took forward the work of ensuring more efficient enforcement of sanctions against Gaddafi and the more important task of making sure the NTC was better supplied. It is difficult to measure the importance of this innovation, but Duncan himself claims the conflict would have persisted for another twelve months without such an approach.⁵¹³

The combined effect of these measured escalations was not, however, sufficient to break the stalemate. The use of force could contain Gaddafi, but while steadily eroding his military capabilities, its impact stopped short of providing the decisive rebel victory that the British government was hoping for. In the context of the constraints described above, the Anaconda strategy made sense. If military force could not quickly achieve a rebel victory, it could steadily undermine the Gaddafi regime over time, with a series of smaller escalations gradually tilting the balance in favour of the opposition forces. The problem not acknowledged with this approach was that while time was not on Gaddafi's side, time was not on the side of Britain and its allies either. This gives rise to the importance of exploring the non-military alternatives, and if and how British policy-makers explored any of these. Given the presence of these constraints and the continued reluctance of the US to play a more proactive role it is worth exploring the

⁵¹⁰ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, cc. 208-209W.

⁵¹¹ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q. 392.

⁵¹² Ibid., Q. 392-395; FAC, "Oral and Written Evidence, 7 September 2011," Ev. 19-20; Prime Minister's Office, *National Security Adviser's Review*, 8-9.

⁵¹³ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q. 394.

extent to which alternative non-military options existed and the extent to which they were explored.

The Possibility of Peace Talks

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the British position set a high bar for the ceasefire proposed in Resolution 1973. Following Hague's statement in Parliament on 26 April, he responded to questions about the possibility of a political settlement, telling MPs that "we have in no way lost sight of that aim, but it will require a genuine ceasefire, which seems *also* to require the departure of Colonel Gaddafi."⁵¹⁴ It would be harder to find a more candid recognition, within the public domain, that the government regarded regime change as a precondition for a ceasefire. Following an informal dialogue between the UN Security Council and members of the AU's ad hoc committee on 16 June, Lyall Grant sought to justify this position, commenting that, "it is clear that a ceasefire with Qadhafi in place would not be credible. This is not about bringing preconditions to negotiations – a ceasefire would simply not be stable while he remained in power."⁵¹⁵ As a contemporary report by International Crisis Group concluded regarding the position taken by many Western governments, "to insist that ultimately, he [Gaddafi] can have no role in the post-Jamahiriya political order is one thing, and almost certainly reflects the opinion of the majority of Libyans as well as of the outside world. But to insist that he must go now, as the precondition for any negotiation, including that of a ceasefire, is to render a ceasefire all but impossible and so to maximise the prospect of continued armed conflict."⁵¹⁶

British policy also seemed to ignore the fact that any ceasefire would be dependent on the actions of both sides in the conflict.⁵¹⁷ Following a meeting with his Italian counterpart on 11

⁵¹⁴ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 50, emphasis added.

⁵¹⁵ FCO "“Together We Must Assist the People of Libya in their Bid for Peace,”” 16 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/together-we-must-assist-the-people-of-libya-in-their-bid-for-peace>

⁵¹⁶ ICG, "Making Sense of Libya," ii.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

April, Hague subtly added an additional term, announcing that “there should be no ceasefire that does not meet the conditions of UNSC Resolutions 1970 and 1973 in full, *and* that is not acceptable to those representing the opposition in Libya, including the Interim National Council.”⁵¹⁸ Cameron adopted a similar track in his testimony before the Liaison Committee the following month. Dismissing the possibility of negotiation, the Prime Minister implored the committee members to “listen to the national transitional council” and pointed out that “they do not believe in holding discussions and talks with Gaddafi.”⁵¹⁹ This amounted to handing the rebels a veto over any ceasefire proposals.

Equally, the government’s continued support for accountability before the ICC was pursued at the expense of a negotiated end to the conflict. Faced with the argument that insisting on criminal prosecution gave Gaddafi little choice but to fight to the death, Fox responded that “that argument is regularly put, but I would put the converse: do we really want a situation in which we give some of those who commit the most heinous crimes against a humanity a get-out by saying, ‘If you’ll only stop fighting, we’ll let you go and you’ll not be subjected to international law?’”⁵²⁰ Hague spoke in similar terms and, while acknowledging the argument that insisting on this form of accountability might have its drawbacks, he argued that “the deterrent effect on regimes such as that in Libya has to be set against the downside,” before adding that “if we believe in the ICC, as we do in the United Kingdom... we must stand by its decisions and support the efforts to bring people to justice within its ambit.”⁵²¹

In addition to the obstacles to a ceasefire that were built into the British position, policymakers were in any case little interested in mediation. Recalling the details of a meeting he had with senior government officials in late April, Muller Stuart writes that, “it was a very instructive meeting vis-à-vis government thinking, as it soon became apparent just how little appetite there

⁵¹⁸ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Discusses Libya and Middle East Issues with Italian Foreign Minister,” 11 April 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-discusses-libya-and-middle-east-issues-with-italian-foreign-minister>, emphasis added.

⁵¹⁹ Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” 38.

⁵²⁰ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 4.

⁵²¹ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 966

was on the part of officials for any initiative that sought to mediate a negotiated solution with Gaddafi.’’⁵²² As noted in the preceding section, the government’s public statements during this period played down the prospect of mediation. In May, Cameron responded to a question about the possibility of negotiated settlement by saying ‘‘I don’t think that is remotely where we are at the moment.’’⁵²³ Instead of pursuing this possibility, the Prime Minister argued that Britain should continue to increase the ‘‘pressure,’’ adding that ‘‘I think that pressure is being quite effective.’’⁵²⁴

Contemporary media reports from mid-July onwards suggested a softening of the British position, but this is difficult to verify.⁵²⁵ It was also reported that Britain would only accept such a possibility if it was approved by the rebels.⁵²⁶ The NTC’s diplomatic representative in London was at the same time quoted as saying that such a proposal ‘‘has no merit and no chance of succeeding... Gaddafi will either leave Libya or be killed.’’⁵²⁷ The suggestion of a change was also contradicted by the position that the Prime Minister took in a joint press conference with South African president Jacob Zuma on 18 July, during which both leaders acknowledged the key differences between their respective positions.⁵²⁸ On the question of Gaddafi’s departure, Cameron made clear that ‘‘the difference is that the President sees that as the outcome of a political process whereas I believe for a political process to work it has to be the starting point.’’⁵²⁹ As Zuma explained, many African states saw negotiation as necessary to deciding the manner of Gaddafi’s departure, determining where he would depart to and under what conditions. There

⁵²² Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, Ch. 10.

⁵²³ Liaison Committee ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 38.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁵ Ian Black, ‘‘Libya: Analysis Push to End Conflict could see Toppled Gaddafi Stay in Libya,’’ *The Guardian*, 22 July 2011; Richard Spencer, ‘‘Gaddafi Could Remain in Libya as World Leaders Hammer out Peace Deal,’’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 July 2011.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ Black, ‘‘Libya: Analysis.’’ See also Stacey Kiran, ‘‘Hague’s ‘Silly’ Idea on Gaddafi is Rejected by Rebels,’’ *Financial Times*, 29 July 2011.

⁵²⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Transcript of Press Conference in Pretoria, South Africa,’’ 18 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-of-press-conference-in-pretoria-south-africa>

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

was no indication of a change of approach in any of Cameron's comments, only a more detailed and thorough overview of the existing position.

Both D'Ancona and Seldon and Snowden suggest that privately, the government's thinking did shift in response to the ongoing stalemate.⁵³⁰ D'Ancona reveals in his account that Cabinet Office officials and MI6 officers drew up a plan for Gaddafi's exit which involved his exile to Equatorial Guinea, a country not party to the Rome Statute.⁵³¹ The fact that Andrew Mitchell was involved in assisting with negotiations with officials in Malabo suggests this was more than a fanciful scheme, yet D'Ancona does not provide any evidence or detail about what came of it. What is clear in both of these accounts is that this possibility was explored with great reluctance and only because of the growing possibility of indefinite stalemate. As Seldon and Snowden write, the Prime Minister viewed the prospect of a negotiated settlement with "revulsion."⁵³² Other accounts which draw upon sources within the government further support the impression that there was a widespread aversion to non-military solutions. The *Guardian's* investigation suggests that ministers viewed Gaddafi's peace feelers as evidence of growing weakness, which only served to further convince them that he could be overthrown.⁵³³ Jeremy Bowen, whose account draws upon sources in the Foreign Office, briefly describes how the regime constantly sent out messages to Western capitals indicating a willingness to talk, but "the reply was always the same: we'll talk, but only when Gaddafi goes."⁵³⁴

The two major diplomatic initiatives carried out during this period were the African Union's peace plan and the mediation efforts of UN envoy Abdul Ilah al-Khatib. Little detail is known about Khatib's diplomacy, although it is known that members of the Contact Group set out terms for him to negotiate with both sides following the group's meeting in Istanbul on 15

⁵³⁰ D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 178; Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 108.

⁵³¹ D'Ancona, *ibid.*

⁵³² Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 108.

⁵³³ Wintour and Watt, "Swept Aside Sceptics."

⁵³⁴ Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 154-155.

July.⁵³⁵ At around the same time, US officials met with Gaddafi's representatives in Tunisia, informing them that while Gaddafi's departure was non-negotiable, anything else was on the table.⁵³⁶ It was these initiatives which led to speculation that a deal might involve Gaddafi departing power while remaining in Libya but, as already described, the NTC quickly ruled such a prospect out. More detail is known about the AU's mediation efforts, which were carried forward by an "ad hoc committee" from April onwards.⁵³⁷ According to De Waal, the AU's peace plan was broadly similar with the proposals of the UN envoy, but more comprehensive.⁵³⁸ The plan would have entailed a cessation of hostilities and a pause in NATO bombing, a comprehensive ceasefire to be monitored by a UN force, and an inclusive, consensual interim government paving the way for elections. The plan was designed to secure Gaddafi's departure from power, but without insisting on his prosecution and without insisting that he be removed before a ceasefire could be put in place.

Gaddafi was reported to have accepted the proposals in principle, under pressure from Zuma and other Africa leaders.⁵³⁹ The major obstacle appears to have been the NTC's unwillingness to accept any solution that did not treat Gaddafi's immediate departure as the starting point, and the continuing support of NATO for this uncompromising position.⁵⁴⁰ Britain failed to offer even symbolic support for such initiatives and exploited divisions within the AU to misrepresent the position of African states. For example, the government consistently sought to highlight and perpetuate the impression that some African states were taking a weaker position because of their closer links with Gaddafi.⁵⁴¹ The British approach was to treat the UN envoy as the exclusive focal point for all diplomatic efforts, with Lyall Grant warning against "parallel

⁵³⁵ FCO, "Libya Contact Group Meeting Concludes," 15 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/libya-contact-group-meeting-concludes>

⁵³⁶ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 7.

⁵³⁷ De Waal, "African Roles," 369-375.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; ICG, "Making Sense of Libya."

⁵⁴¹ HC Deb, 30/03/2011, c. 354.

negotiations,’’ in a coded snub to the AU’s ongoing efforts in this area.⁵⁴² According to De Waal, Britain and France even sent emissaries to an AU summit in Malabo, who privately warned African states that they would object to any mention of ‘‘ceasefire’’ in their proposals.⁵⁴³

The above facts are surprising, given the difficulties of sustaining military operations that were described in the previous section. Ultimately, the AU’s proposals would have led to the fulfilment of British objectives, albeit with the tactical concession that Gaddafi would likely escape prosecution. It might be rightly argued that Gaddafi’s intransigence and eccentricity would have made any negotiated solution extremely unlikely, but that is separate from the question of whether Britain invested sufficient effort in testing this assumption. In his account of British policy during this period, Muller Stuart offers a plausible explanation for Britain’s reluctance to consider a diplomatic route. In reference to the strategy for focusing on defection, he writes that, ‘‘any attempt to present potential defectors with an alternative diplomatic scenario was counter-productive to the ultimate objective of removing Gaddafi from power. All attempts at mediation were viewed through this policy prism.’’⁵⁴⁴ This is certainly consistent with the Anaconda strategy also, as any diplomatic signal suggesting a weakening of resolve would undermine such an approach.

A further explanation might focus more on the meaning the conflict held for policy-makers. The Prime Minister opened the London Conference on 29 March by informing the assembled foreign ministers that ‘‘our action saved the city of Benghazi. It averted a massacre. *And it has given freedom a chance in Libya.*’’⁵⁴⁵ The government’s narrative about the Arab Spring envisioned the inevitable march of freedom, with Britain steadfastly assisting those on the right side of this battle. Libya was often located within this wider narrative and as Richards reveals in his testimony before the FAC, the government continued to see the conflict as a ‘‘black and

⁵⁴² FCO, ‘‘‘Together We Must Assist.’’

⁵⁴³ De Waal, ‘‘African Roles,’’ 374.

⁵⁴⁴ Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, Ch. 10.

⁵⁴⁵ Cameron, ‘‘Speech at London Conference,’’ emphasis added.

white, good and bad issue.’’⁵⁴⁶ From this more absolutist perspective, compromise was not seen as a purely technical or pragmatic outcome, but as a betrayal of the values that Britain’s military action was presumed to be upholding. For example, when Hague effectively granted the NTC the right to unilaterally shape the ceasefire terms, he justified this by saying that ‘‘anything short of this would be a betrayal of the people of Libya...’’⁵⁴⁷ This less compromising stance also resonated with a longstanding tradition of ‘‘anti-appeasement.’’⁵⁴⁸ Compromising with Gaddafi and failing to show the resolve necessary to ensure an outright rebel victory was more at odds with these narratives than the winner-takes-all military solution that Cameron and others clearly favoured. Symbolism trumped practicality. As one Western official put it, ‘‘a peace conference in Malta would be a defeat for us. It’s not going to happen.’’⁵⁴⁹

Breakthrough and victory

The first signs of a changing dynamic were already present in June. At this stage, politicians and military leaders began to suggest that the momentum was gradually shifting in favour of the rebels, although few at the time expected a sudden breakthrough.⁵⁵⁰ The campaign in the Nafusa Mountains, in the northwest of Tripolitania, witnessed a series of successes.⁵⁵¹ What appeared to be short-lived gains in June, were followed by the securing of the supply lines from Tunisia to Nalut at the end of July and the capture of the strategically located Gharyan in mid-August. This paved the way for rebels from the mountain region to launch a successful assault on Zawiyah on 13 August. Elsewhere, rebel militias were pressing back against Gaddafi’s forces

⁵⁴⁶ FAC, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 19 January 2015, Q. 333. For other relevant examples of the government locating military action in Libya within a wider narrative about the Arab Spring *see*, for example, William Hague, ‘‘Helping the Arab Spring Succeed is Britain’s Cause Too,’’ *The Evening Standard*, 8 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/helping-the-arab-spring-succeed-is-britains-cause-too>; Hague, ‘‘We Will Continue to Fight,’’; Nick Clegg, ‘‘Deputy Prime Minister’s Speech on the Arab Spring,’’ 22 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/deputy-prime-ministers-speech-on-the-arab-spring>

⁵⁴⁷ FCO, ‘‘Foreign Secretary Discusses Libya,’’ 11 April 2011.

⁵⁴⁸ Daddow and Schnapper, ‘‘Liberal Intervention,’’ 340-341.

⁵⁴⁹ Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 151.

⁵⁵⁰ MOD, ‘‘Good Progress Seen in Libya Operations,’’ 24 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/good-progress-seen-in-libya-operations>

⁵⁵¹ Bell, Butts and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 4*, 13-16.

on the frontlines in Zlitan, 160 kilometers east of Tripoli, and Brega, in the eastern half of the country. On 20 August, rebel groups advanced on Tripoli from multiple directions, coinciding with a prearranged uprising by the city's residents.⁵⁵² Despite some fierce resistance around Gaddafi's Bab al-Aziziya complex and the surrounding neighbourhoods, rebel groups secured control of Tripoli more quickly than anyone had expected and by the end of the month a modicum of normalcy had returned to the capital. The remnants of the Gaddafi regime were now holed up in traditional regime strongholds such as Sebha, Bani Walid and Sirte. The latter two towns were the scene of significant rebel bombardments from September onwards, culminating in the fall of Bani Walid on 17 October and the capture and killing of Gaddafi in his home town of Sirte on 20 October.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵² Ibid., 17-19 and ICG, *Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi*, Middle East/North Africa Report, no. 114, 14 December 2011, esp. 1-5.

⁵⁵³ Bell, Butts and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 4*, 20-21 and ICG, "Holding Libya Together," 1-5.



Figure 1: Map of Libya

Source: Bell and Witter, *Escalation and Intervention*, 12.

The government provided no indications that it expected this military breakthrough and had refused to be drawn into discussion of how long the conflict might last. At the end of June, Hague warned Parliament that “actually, even 1,000 boffins in a think-tank, all working together feverishly with all the information available to them, would still not have known how long the Libya campaign might last.”⁵⁵⁴ According to the insider accounts, Cameron and those around him only became convinced that a rebel victory on the battlefield was likely in August.⁵⁵⁵ While greeting the news of the fall of Tripoli and the death of Gaddafi, British politicians were keen to avoid excessive triumphalism and stress the Libyan role in securing

⁵⁵⁴ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 973

⁵⁵⁵ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 179.

victory.⁵⁵⁶ However, British policy contributed substantially to the changing fortunes of rebel forces in important ways. This section analyses this contribution and in doing so it supports the conclusion that the British government and its international allies were willing to take significant risks in furthering their objective of removing Gaddafi from power and in the process they sanctioned actions that clearly went beyond the spirit of Resolution 1973.

During the early months of the campaign western governments had hoped for a military breakthrough coming from the east.⁵⁵⁷ Such an approach was likely based on an over-estimation on the strength of rebel forces in Cyrenaica, who lacked the discipline and experience necessary to prevail on the ground. Fox recalls how, “we took the view in the UK that the key was Tripoli and unless he [Gaddafi] was feeling the heat in Tripoli, he would not much care what was happening on the other side of the country.”⁵⁵⁸ A strategic decision was therefore made to shift the focus of military activity toward the western half of the country. In this region, rebel groups were discovered to be more organised and effective fighters. Contemporary press briefings by the MoD show that the RAF began shifting its focus toward targets in the western half of the country from mid-July onwards.⁵⁵⁹ Henceforward, there was an increase in airstrikes in the Nafusa Mountains, and air power was important in supporting rebel efforts to take Zlitan and Zawiyah. Importantly, the stated motives behind this change of strategy is good evidence that the primary mover of British policy was a desire to win the conflict, rather than preserve the more narrowly defined civilian protection mandate that the government claimed to be upholding.

⁵⁵⁶ Prime Minister’s Office, “PM’s Statement On Libya,” 22 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-statement-on-libya>; Prime Minister’s Office, “PM’s Statement on Colonel Gaddafi’s Death,” 20 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-colonel-qadhafis-death>; FCO, “Foreign Secretary, Defense Secretary and Development Secretary Statements on Libya,” 24 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-defence-secretary-and-development-secretary-statements-on-libya>

⁵⁵⁷ Richards, *Taking Command*, 316.

⁵⁵⁸ Wintour and Watt, “Cameron’s Libyan War.”

⁵⁵⁹ MOD, “HMS Liverpool Fires on Gaddafi Boats,” 11 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hms-liverpool-fires-on-gaddafi-boats>; MOD, “British Forces Continue Attacks on Gaddafi’s Troops,” 14 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-forces-continue-attacks-on-gaddafis-troops>

If air power alone could not achieve the breakthrough politicians were aiming for, there was a growing recognition of the need to influence events on the ground. It was the Gulf nations, Qatar in particular, that provided the route to this option. The scale of Qatari interference in Libya's affairs only became apparent in the aftermath of the civil war, and the motives behind it remain somewhat obscure.⁵⁶⁰ Nonetheless, it is clear that Qatar contributed substantially to the rebel cause in the form of financial aid, arms transfers and the insertion of its own special forces. The United States, reluctant to increase its own involvement, quietly permitted and encouraged the efforts of both Qatar and UAE to assist rebel groups as early as April.⁵⁶¹ So long as these states were not providing US-manufactured weapons, the White House was happy to turn a blind eye, which meant also ignoring the arms embargo that NATO was supposed to be enforcing. The effects of these transfers were being to be felt on the ground by June, as Qatari arms and training strengthened rebel forces, particularly in the western half of the country. According to various reports, Qatar provided approximately 20,000 tonnes of weaponry and over \$400 million in financial aid.⁵⁶² Qatar's Chief of Defence staff even claimed in October that his country had "hundreds" of its own forces on the ground in every region of the country.⁵⁶³

Throughout the campaign, when the full extent of Qatari meddling was not appreciated, the government praised the contributions made by its Gulf allies, with Cameron calling them "absolutely superb."⁵⁶⁴ When details began to slowly emerge about the nature and extent of Qatar's involvement, the government feigned ignorance. The fact that any initiatives took place

⁵⁶⁰ Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 122-131; Sam Dagher, Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, "Tiny Kingdom's Huge Role in Libya Draws Concern," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 October 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204002304576627000922764650>

⁵⁶¹ Dagher, Levinson, and Coker, "Tiny Kingdom's Huge Role."; James Risen, Mark Mazzetti, Michael Mazzetti, "US-Approved Arms for Libya Rebels Fell Into Jihadi Hands," *The New York Times*, 5 December 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/world/africa/weapons-sent-to-libyan-rebels-with-us-approval-fell-into-islamist-hands.html>

⁵⁶² Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 128.

⁵⁶³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁶⁴ HC Deb, 27/06/2011, c. 630.

on a bilateral basis, outside of NATO structures, provided the basis for plausible deniability.⁵⁶⁵ When the Defence Committee requested the government to “clarify” how it ensured that any such bilateral initiatives were consistent with the UN resolutions the government simply avoided providing a straight answer, instead feebly referring to its own bilateral relationship with these states as a means of monitoring compliance.⁵⁶⁶

The revelations contained in Lord Richards’ memoir straightforwardly contradict the impression that the British government was either unaware of or indifferent toward Qatari involvement. Richards writes how “the Libya campaign underlined that well-directed proxy forces can be a powerful alternative to Western boots on the ground,” and he is especially praising of Qatar for its role in facilitating this approach.⁵⁶⁷ Richards also reveals how he played a part in assisting, encouraging and advising the Qataris in their efforts, traveling there to “help them set up an operational theatre-level headquarters” and advising them throughout the campaign.⁵⁶⁸ This account is consistent with his testimony before the FAC’s inquiry and Mark Urban’s report on the more secretive aspects of Britain’s Libya war. According to Urban, Richards took the initiative to encourage greater Qatari involvement as early as April, following the government’s decision to sanction a “train and equip programme.”⁵⁶⁹ Some accounts also suggest that Britain played a role in brokering Qatari arms transfers, which Seldon and Snowdon claim were the “fruit of Cameron’s productive relationship with HBJ.”⁵⁷⁰ None of this is to suggest that Doha was pressured into a course of action it would otherwise have resisted, only that the evidence suggests Britain played an important role in encouraging and facilitating greater involvement.

This policy of working through surrogates has proven more problematic than was anticipated by the government at the time. Qatar appears to have used the opportunity to pursue its own

⁵⁶⁵ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 44

⁵⁶⁶ HM Government, “Operations in Libya: Government Response to the Committee’s Ninth Report of Session 2010-12,” HC 1952, 30 April 2012, 10.

⁵⁶⁷ Richards, *Taking Command*, 317.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁵⁶⁹ Urban, “Inside Story.”

⁵⁷⁰ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 111.

agenda, contributing to the growing divisions within rebel ranks by favouring Islamist militias and continuing to interfere in Libyan internal matters beyond the conclusion of the conflict. As early as April 2011, the very same month that Obama had approved Qatari arms transfers to Libya, US intelligence was already growing concerned that such transfers were being diverted to Islamist groups.⁵⁷¹ Of the 18 shipments Qatar is reported to have made, only five were routed through the official channel created by the NTC for this purpose.⁵⁷² The government also failed to anticipate the possibility of post-conflict interference from its regional allies. Commenting in September, Hague suggested that such a prospect was unlikely because, “I cannot see the incentive for neighbouring countries to intervene.”⁵⁷³ Just weeks later, the NTC leaders that Britain had invested so much in were complaining of Qatar’s undue influence in their affairs.⁵⁷⁴

Britain also inserted its own special forces into the conflict. As described in the previous section, the government had dispatched military advisors to assist rebel forces as early April. By the summer, British special forces were working alongside their counterparts from France and Qatar, training and preparing rebel forces in the western half of the country.⁵⁷⁵ Such initiatives took place on a bilateral basis, outside of NATO structures. Unlike Qatar and France, Britain did not provide arms directly, but as British special forces were working on the ground alongside their Qatari equivalents, this made little practical difference. Urban describes how the role of these forces expanded as the conflict wore on. Toward the final stages of the campaign, members of D Squadron of 22 SAS Regiment were blending in with rebel militias, assisting and coordinating ground attacks against Tripoli. Both Richards and Stavridis have acknowledged the important contribution made by special forces, and while their numbers were modest, most informed commentators see them as having made a decisive contribution to the breakthrough.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷¹ Risen, Mazzetti, and Schmidt, “Arms for Libya.”

⁵⁷² Dagher, Levinson, and Coker, “Tiny Kingdom’s Huge Role.”

⁵⁷³ FAC, ‘Oral and Written Evidence,’ 7 September 2011, 4.

⁵⁷⁴ Peter Beaumont, “Qatar Accused of Interfering in Libyan Affairs,” *The Guardian*, 4 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/04/qatar-interfering-libya>

⁵⁷⁵ Urban, “Inside Story.”

⁵⁷⁶ Richards, *Taking Command*, 315; Stavridis, *Accidental Admiral*, 60; Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, Ch. 7; Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, Ch. 11; Bell, Butts and Witter, *Libyan Revolution Part 4*.

Such an approach is clear evidence of an increasing willingness to take greater risks and to stray beyond the UN mandate in order to achieve a military victory.

Finally, while air strikes were still carried out with a keen attention to avoid civilian casualties and against targets that could plausibly be claimed as representing a potential threat to civilians, the primary purpose of NATO airpower was to facilitate rebel offensives, rather than merely contain Gaddafi's forces from inflicting harm on civilians. The fall of Zlitan, the next city on the frontline following the breakout from Misrata, was preceded by an intensification in NATO bombing and it was here that credible allegations of civilian casualties first surfaced.⁵⁷⁷ On the eastern front, while still restricted by the difficulties of avoiding civilian casualties, the RAF was heavily involved in assisting rebel efforts to finally capture the strategically important oil town of Brega.⁵⁷⁸ A contemporary press report refers to NATO airplanes operating in "what amounts to a combat support role."⁵⁷⁹ Airstrikes also helped paved the way for the march on Tripoli, with Richards revealing in his memoirs that bombing raids were used to "open a corridor for the rebels as they moved toward the capital."⁵⁸⁰ A contemporary report by the *Telegraph* claimed as NATO was aware of rebel plans to trigger an uprising in the capital, British airstrikes were launched against targets in Tripoli in advance of this and to pave the way for its capture by rebel groups.⁵⁸¹ Before, military force was being used to prevent Gaddafi's forces from retaking towns and cities that had been occupied by rebel groups, it was now being used to assist the rebel advances.

The government generally sought to avoid acknowledging any evidence of awareness of rebel abuses and insisted that if it had evidence that such groups were posing a threat to civilians it would act against them. The idea that NATO was wholly unaware of the actions of Misratan

⁵⁷⁷ Christopher Stephen and Richard Norton-Taylor, "RAF Clears Way as Town Falls After 8-Week Fight," *The Guardian*, 2 August 2011; BBC News, "What Really Happened in Libya's Zlitan?" 11 August 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14486170>

⁵⁷⁸ Goulter, "The British Experience," 172.

⁵⁷⁹ Christopher Stephen and Ewen McAskill, "Middle East: Libya: Rebel Fighters Close in on Key Oil Town with Heavy Support from NATO Bombers," *The Guardian*, 19 July 2011.

⁵⁸⁰ Richards, *Taking Command*, 317.

⁵⁸¹ Gordon Rayner, Thomas Harding, Duncan Gardham, "Britain's Secret Role in Creating an Open Road for Tripoli Triumph," *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 2011.

militias in depopulating the town of Tawergha, in revenge for its role in supporting Gaddafi's siege of their city, is difficult to take seriously.⁵⁸² Beyond seeking assurances from the NTC's leadership, Britain and its allies appear to have been relatively indifferent to those caught on the wrong side. This became harder to deny during the offensives against the regime's final strongholds in September and October, where the assaults against Sirte in particular involved widespread and indiscriminate shelling of civilian populated areas.⁵⁸³ The government defended its position by arguing that rebel forces, in contrast to those of the former regime, were not "systematically" targeting civilians in the way that pro-Gaddafi forces were accused of doing, but such a fine distinction implied agreement with the accusation that the actions of rebel groups were still causing civilian harm.⁵⁸⁴ The RAF did not waiver from the need to limit the possibility of civilian deaths directly resulting from its air strikes, but the very same air strikes undoubtedly facilitated the wanton destruction of a town regarded as having enjoyed excessive largesse under the Gaddafi regime. Indifference to such collective punishment is clear evidence that the UN Resolution had become, in the words of Bob Ainsworth MP, a "busted flush."⁵⁸⁵ It is therefore not surprising that politicians emphasised the role of Libyans themselves in defeating Gaddafi. To have acknowledged the role of special forces, of British involvement in Qatar's arms transfers, or to have conceded that NATO was effectively operating in a combat support role, would have given further weight to the growing number of states who were critical of the way in which NATO and its partners had implemented 1973.

⁵⁸² Tarik Kafala, "'Cleansed' Libyan Town Spills its Terrible Secrets," BBC News Magazine, 12 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16051349>

⁵⁸³ Christopher Stephen, "Libya: Battle for Sirte: Rebels Launch Attack as Concern Grows for Civilians Trapped in City," *The Guardian*, 16 September 2011; Wyre Davies, "Libya Conflict: Payback Time For Gaddafi's Home Town of Sirte," BBC News, 18 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15356893>; Wyre Davies, "Gaddafi's Hometown Sirte Blasted into the Dark Ages," BBC News, 26 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15454033>

⁵⁸⁴ See the testimony of Christian Turner, the FCO's MENA Director, in Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev. 22-23.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Ev. 20.

Post-Conflict Assumptions

If memories of Bosnia played a fundamental role in shaping the decision to commit force, it was memories of Iraq and, to a lesser degree Afghanistan, which shaped British plans for the post-conflict phase. Despite this starting point, the government has since faced strong criticism for its approach. The FAC concluded that the government's plans were based on erroneous intelligence and were incapable of implementation.⁵⁸⁶ Although the report did not indulge in superficial comparisons with Iraq, media reporting of its findings were quick to highlight this appearance of similarity.⁵⁸⁷ While most earlier accounts of Britain's role in the intervention tended to end on a tone of approval, more recent contributions have drawn attention to the post-conflict instability that has resulted and hint toward parallels with Iraq.⁵⁸⁸ A 2018 report by the Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, a commission chaired by David Cameron, was also critical of some of the assumptions present in the Libya intervention, suggesting analogies with the Iraq conflict including the preference for "pop-up democracy."⁵⁸⁹ This section examines British policy toward post-conflict planning. It shows evidence that the government's policy in this area was driven more by idealistic assumptions than clear objectives. However, it warns against simplistic parallels with Iraq and argues that an attempt to apply the "lessons" of that conflict in fact contributed to some of the weaknesses in the government's approach.

Work on post-conflict planning was carried out on a cross-Whitehall basis, with DFID having overall responsibility. The centrepiece of British policy was the work of the "International

⁵⁸⁶ FAC, *Libya: Examination of Intervention*, 25-26.

⁵⁸⁷ Patrick Wintour and Jessica Elgot, "MPs Deliver Damning Verdict On David Cameron's Libyan Intervention," *The Guardian*, 14 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/14/mps-deliver-damning-verdict-on-camerons-libya-intervention>

⁵⁸⁸ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 276; Muller Stuart, *Storm in the Desert*, Ch. 14; Garnett, Mabon and Smith, *British Foreign Policy*, 312.

⁵⁸⁹ Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, *Escaping the Fragility Trap*, 15-16.

Stabilization Response Team” (ISRT),⁵⁹⁰ established in May following the Rome meeting of the “Contact Group.”⁵⁹¹ It pulled together experts from a number of countries involved in the coalition, including seven personnel from DFID’s Stabilization Unit. It was then dispatched to the eastern region of Libya to carry out “fact finding” and assess the country’s interim “stabilization needs.” This initiative, and the resulting report, was held up as evidence that the government was taking post-conflict planning and reconstruction seriously, in contrast to the experience of Iraq. However, the authors of the report were quite explicit that they were not providing a comprehensive transition plan, that it was for Libyans themselves to determine their future and that the purpose of the report was “to capture the ISRT’s fact-finding and analysis for rapid use by Libyan leaders and organizations and the international community.”⁵⁹²

The work of the ISRT rested on some optimistic assumptions. Although the Foreign Office described “Stabilisation Response Teams” as providing a “bespoke” approach to post-conflict planning,⁵⁹³ Hague later acknowledged during the FAC’s inquiry that those deployed did not have any specific knowledge of Libya and that their expertise was of a general and technical nature.⁵⁹⁴ British policy therefore reflected the assumption that all people and all countries were in some way fundamentally amenable to the prescriptions of experts who knew nothing of Libya’s culture and politics. Secondly, the report implicitly assumed that the transition to a more democratic system could be taken for granted. Hague later revealed that, “they were working on the basis that the plans, the advice they were working on could be implemented by an elected Libyan government with UN support: that is the model we are talking about here.”⁵⁹⁵ Furthermore, regardless of any underlying assumptions, the report did not define clear

⁵⁹⁰ International Stabilisation Response Team (ISRT), *Libya 20 May – 30 June*. Department for International Development, 2011, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67470/ibya-isrt-June2011.pdf

⁵⁹¹ For details on the ISRT and Britain’s role within it *see* HC Deb, 07/06/2011, cc. 31-32, 38, 41; HC Deb 08/06/2011, c. 149; HC Deb, 21/06/2011, c. 154W; HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 958, 964.

⁵⁹² ISRT, *Libya*, 4.

⁵⁹³ HC Deb, 21/06/2011, c. 154W.

⁵⁹⁴ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q 292.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid*, Q. 292.

objectives or make policy recommendations beyond listing vague aspirations. In his testimony to the FAC, Duncan described the plans as an “unrealistic desktop exercise.”⁵⁹⁶

With the ISRT limiting itself to assessments and fact finding, the task of providing more concrete plans was assumed to fall to the NTC. The statements made by ministers took for granted the assumption that the council would automatically have the legitimacy and capability to fulfil the role of providing detailed post-conflict plans and governing Libya in any transitional period.⁵⁹⁷ Following the visit of the council’s chairman, Mustapha Abdul Jalil, Hague announced that “the NTC has already pulled together an interim administration, it has already begun to provide services in liberated areas and it has started to plan for democratic transition after Qadhafi has gone.”⁵⁹⁸ However, at this stage, the council’s plans were little more than bold declarations of support for values and principles that their powerful Western sponsors would have welcomed. These plans were later conceded by Jalil to have been a “utopian ideal.”⁵⁹⁹ The government encouraged the council to add further detail and refinements to its transition plans and in June ministers agreed a series of areas in which Britain would be able to provide assistance and advice to the NTC, upon receipt of a formal request.⁶⁰⁰ Despite insisting that the council was not a “government in waiting,” Britain joined France in offering diplomatic recognition in July.⁶⁰¹ Both Cameron and Hague were clearly reassured by what they saw as the genuine commitment to “freedom” and democracy on the part of its leaders. In his testimony to the FAC inquiry, Richards recalled how “there was a quorum of

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 377.

⁵⁹⁷ *See*, for example, Prime Minister’s Office, “Prime Minister Holds Talks with Libyan NTC Chairman,” 12 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-holds-talks-with-libyan-ntc-chairman>; Prime Minister’s Office, “Statement Between the PM and the Chairman of the Libyan NTC,” 12 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-between-the-pm-and-the-chairman-of-the-libyan-ntc>; HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 32, 37, 41; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Discusses Libya on BBC’s Today Programme,” 16 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-discusses-libya-on-bbcs-today-programme>.

⁵⁹⁸ FCO, “Head of the Libyan National Transitional Council Visits UK,” 12 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/head-of-the-libyan-national-transitional-council-visits-uk>

⁵⁹⁹ Becker and Shane, “Libyan Gamble Part 1.”

⁶⁰⁰ Prime Minister’s Office, *National Security Adviser’s Review*, 14.

⁶⁰¹ FCO, “Libyan Charge d’Affaires to be Expelled from UK,” 27 July 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/libyan-charge-d-affaires-to-be-expelled-from-uk>

respectable Libyans who were absolutely assuring the Foreign Office and our political leaders... that they had a grasp over these militias and all we needed to do was to win and they would all come to heel.’⁶⁰² Yet by the time of Tripoli’s liberation in August, the Council was already wracked by divisions between secularists and Islamists while at the same time facing militia groups who contested its legitimacy and authority during the takeover of the capital.⁶⁰³

The statements made by ministers during this period provide no more evidence of clear objectives guiding British policy than did the ISRT. Instead, there was simply a vague and implicit assumption that if Gaddafi were to be removed from his position then quick progress toward a more liberal, democratic political system was to be expected, as was encouraged by the assurances described above. This was often taken for granted by locating Libya in an abstract argument about the democratizing power of the Arab Spring. Typical of this pattern of thinking was Cameron’s speech to the London Conference, in which he made reference to the NTC’s “Vision of a Democratic Libya” by situating it in a wider narrative which saw the spread of liberal values as the incontrovertible promise of the Arab Spring: “These aren’t values that belong to any one nation. They are universal. They are embedded in the Vision of a Democratic Libya set out by the Interim Transitional National Council today.”⁶⁰⁴ Subsequent events served to reinforce this idealism. Following Hague and Mitchell’s visit to Benghazi in June, the Foreign Secretary explained that “my visit allowed a window into a Libya free from Qadhafi – where legitimate aspirations of the people are welcomed not repressed, and where debate, a free media and civil society are encouraged not crushed.”⁶⁰⁵ The swift and apparently successful liberation of Tripoli provided a further fillip to this idealistic vision. In September, Cameron informed the media how “I’m an optimist about Libya; I’ve been an optimist all the way through and I’m optimistic about the National Transitional Council and what they are able

⁶⁰² FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q 343.

⁶⁰³ The best account of the NTC and the challenges it faced is Peter Bartu, “The Corridor of Uncertainty; the National Transitional Council’s Battle for Legitimacy and Recognition,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, eds. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) Kindle

⁶⁰⁴ Cameron, “Speech at London Conference.”

⁶⁰⁵ FCO, “Charge d’Affaires Expelled.”

to achieve.’⁶⁰⁶ As Duncan retrospectively concluded, ‘‘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.’’⁶⁰⁷

A major focus of the FAC inquiry was whether or not the British government had a good understanding of events on the ground and whether its post-conflict planning assumptions reflected sound assumptions and accurate intelligence. The committee reached the verdict that the government’s plans were based on ‘‘incomplete and inaccurate intelligence.’’⁶⁰⁸ In addition to their lack of expertise on Libyan politics, DFID’s experts were also limited by the amount of time they had to carry out their assessment and the places they were allowed to visit.⁶⁰⁹ In their testimony to the FAC, both Richards and Duncan provided good evidence of faulty information and wishful thinking. Richards described how ‘‘I remember at one meeting... asking for more explanation of the tribal issues, and some expert said, ‘They’re not a factor in this campaign.’’’ Duncan claimed that ‘‘there was no attempt whatever to analyse the political complexion of the country... That was a necessary exercise, which was not done.’’⁶¹⁰ Hague did not completely dispute the accusation that the government did not fully understand events on the ground, but justified this by pointing out that neither the NTC nor Gaddafi fared much better in this regard, arguing that ‘‘if they did not know, it is probably wrong to expect somebody sitting in the backrooms of the Foreign Office or Vauxhall Cross to know better than they did.’’⁶¹¹ This informational vacuum allowed the government to persist with optimistic forecasts and impose its own idealistic visions on events.

⁶⁰⁶ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Extracts of Interviews with CNN and Al Jazeera,’’ 1 September 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extracts-of-interviews-with-cnn-and-al-jazeera>

⁶⁰⁷ FAC, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 19 January 2016, Q 379.

⁶⁰⁸ FAC, *Examination of Intervention*, 25-26.

⁶⁰⁹ Owing to security considerations, the ISRT was unable to travel further west than Misrata. *See* ISRT, *Libya*, 4.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Q 379.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, Q 311.

In the area of security specifically, there is little evidence of anticipation of the likely challenges, still less the presence of adequate planning. The major issue confronting the new Libya was security fragmentation, with myriad armed groups operating outside of central control.⁶¹² Following the death of Gaddafi, Hague publicly acknowledged the “urgent” work of disarming and demobilizing the myriad militia groups but beyond warning the NTC leadership of the implications of this problem and tentatively offering assistance if it was desired, it is unclear how British policy prepared for this eventuality.⁶¹³ As already highlighted, the ISRT report was intended to be implemented by an elected democratic government, rather than an interim authority struggling against suspicions that it lacked legitimacy. In his testimony to the FAC’s inquiry, Fox explained how he became “acutely aware of the lack of planning for how the armed forces would be dealt with and how the various militias might be brought together” during his visit to Tripoli in October.⁶¹⁴ The Defence Secretary offered to assist by helping draw up legislation similar to the UK’s Armed Forces Act but this offer was not taken up and so “nothing ever came of it.”⁶¹⁵

A greater rhetorical emphasis on post-conflict planning was not matched by a corresponding commitment of resources and political will. According to the government’s own estimates, the cost of military operations ran to £212 million and independent analysts place the figure much higher.⁶¹⁶ In contrast, the government put aside little over £20 million for post-conflict stabilisation activities and £20 million to support political and economic reform.⁶¹⁷ There was a general feeling that Libya was sufficiently wealthy to pay for its own reconstruction, with the

⁶¹² ICG, “Holding Libya Together.”

⁶¹³ FCO, “Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary on the Death of Gaddafi,” 21 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-foreign-secretary-on-the-death-of-qadhafi>

⁶¹⁴ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q 247.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ HC Deb, 08/12/2011, c. 41WS; Nick Hopkins, “Libya Conflict May Cost UK £1.75 bn,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/sep/25/libya-conflict-uk-defence-bill>

⁶¹⁷ HC Deb, 04/07/2011, cc. 995-996W; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Visits Libya,” 17 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-visits-libya>

priority being on unfreezing the country's assets. Typical of this sentiment was Cameron's remarks in the Commons following the killing of Gaddafi, when he stated that "everything that I have seen of the Libyan leadership shows that it wants to get on with rebuilding its country, and because of its oil wealth and the size of its sovereign wealth fund, it has the means by which to do it."⁶¹⁸

The volume of personnel devoted to the task of post-war planning and reconstruction also appears to have been modest. The NSC did create a committee for officials to take forward work on post-conflict planning,⁶¹⁹ yet within DFID, just fifteen officials worked full time as part of the department's Libya Crisis Unit and a mere seven personnel were deployed as part of the ISRT.⁶²⁰ The Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence were less forthcoming about the number of personnel working on this issue, but the evidence conveys the impression that neither the military nor the MoD were especially interested in this area.⁶²¹ In their later testimony to the FAC, Richards and Fox spoke as if this area of policy was outside of their remit, despite the government having claimed that post-conflict planning would be done on a cross-Whitehall basis.⁶²² The impression that Britain did not devote sufficient attention or resources to this area was shared by the American president, who in a revealing interview in 2016, expressed his regret that "I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya's proximity, in investing in the follow up."⁶²³

The similarities with Iraq, while superficially pleasing, distract from important differences between the two cases. Hague was keen to emphasise that a key difference with Iraq was that without a presence on the ground, Britain lacked the capacity to implement any of its plans.

⁶¹⁸ HC Deb, 24/10/2011, c. 38. For similar sentiments, *see also* HC Deb, 05/09/2011, cc. 24-25; FAC, "Oral and Written Evidence," 7 September 2011, Ev. 4.

⁶¹⁹ Prime Minister's Office, *National Security Adviser's Review*, 12.

⁶²⁰ HC Deb, 20/06/2011, c. 26W.

⁶²¹ HC Deb, 21/06/2011, c. 143W, 154W.

⁶²² FAC, "Oral Evidence," 19 January 2016, Q 355, Q 247.

⁶²³ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

Summing up this argument, the former Foreign Secretary tried to persuade the FAC that “in Iraq, it seems that we did not have the plans, even though we had the power. In Libya, we had plenty of plans, but no power to implement them.”⁶²⁴ Even if we dismiss the plans as flawed or insufficient, the argument about implementation remains valid. Not having a ground presence limited the options. Dominic Asquith, Britain’s Ambassador to Libya from November 2011, made a similar argument, pointing out that “if you are not prepared to commit the force to the ground, how do you persuade people to put in place a demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programme against the will of some of them?”⁶²⁵ The same factor limited Britain’s ability to counter weapons proliferation, with Fox explaining that “I don’t think there was any way that could be prevented, unless we were willing to put forces on the ground, which we were not.”⁶²⁶

Secondly, unlike in Iraq where a coalition of the willing imposed its own solutions on the country, the intervening states on this occasion adopted a less prescriptive approach. Hague conceded that this was one area in which hindsight provides grounds for a re-evaluation of the principles underpinning British policy, acknowledging that “the approach has largely relied on the Libyans sorting it out on their own” and suggesting an alternative, more prescriptive agenda might be preferable in future.⁶²⁷ Both he and Asquith similarly viewed the UN mission as insufficiently prescriptive. Asquith related how “it came in with the point of view that international assistance needed to respond to a Libyan lead, but given the state of the Libyan capacity to administer after Gaddafi, to be honest, Libya-led did not necessarily mean well-led.”⁶²⁸ In describing the UN role in the post-conflict phase, Ian Martin, the head of the mission, drew attention to the undoubted success in helping Libya hold democratic elections in June 2012 and rightly pointed out that without a stable democratic government, it was difficult

⁶²⁴ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q 289.

⁶²⁵ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 27 October, 2015, Q. 109.

⁶²⁶ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 258.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., Q. 309.

⁶²⁸ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 27 October, 2015, Q. 100.

to see how the UN could address the problems in the security sector.⁶²⁹ However, he also acknowledged that the mission did “not attempt to intervene at key moments of internal disarray... believing that these decisions were best left to Libyans to work through.”⁶³⁰

This attitude did not emerge by accident. Although the government was never clear about the objectives it was pursuing it was consistent in stressing from the beginning that its approach would be “UN-led” and “Libyan-owned.”⁶³¹ The former principle reflected the calculation that the UN would possess greater legitimacy with the international community than a coalition of the willing.⁶³² The latter rested on the assessment that Western impositions would be viewed as suspect by local populations. As Hague explained to Parliament following the publication of the ISRT report, “it would be quite wrong for the international community to say, ‘that is what we are going to try to impose on Libya.’”⁶³³ The Prime Minister reiterated this hands-off attitude as the military campaign began to wind down, telling MPs that “of course there is a role for foreign advice, help and support, but I do not think we want to see an army of foreign consultants driving around in 4x4s, giving the impression that this is something being done to the Libyans, rather than something that is being done by them.”⁶³⁴ By shifting the responsibility to indigenous actors, the interventionists were able to absolve themselves for responsibility for whatever came next. When in 2015 the Liaison Committee suggested to Cameron that he might bear some responsibility for the instability then engulfing the country, the Prime Minister responded by arguing, “I would defend our action in Libya in that we responded to the potential of a genocide by Gaddafi. With allies, we stopped that from

⁶²⁹ Ian Martin, “The United Nations’ Role in the First Year of the Transition,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, eds. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Kindle.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁶³¹ For early declarations of these principles *see* HC Deb, 24/03/2011, c. 1119; HC Deb, 28/03/2011, c. 38.

⁶³² FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 19 January 2016, Q. 290.

⁶³³ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 964.

⁶³⁴ HC Deb, 05/09/2011, c. 24.

happening and saved lives. That gave the Libyan people the chance of a better future, but it is a chance they haven't yet taken.’⁶³⁵

Some of the potential shortcomings in the government's approach can in fact be traced to a conscious attempt to avoid what were perceived to have been the mistakes of Iraq. Andrew Mitchell set out from the beginning to build the government's policy upon the basis of what officials took to be the ‘lessons of Iraq.’⁶³⁶ The rhetoric often suggested that merely by not repeating the assumed errors of previous conflicts, a positive outcome was automatically guaranteed. Appearing before the FAC following the capture of Tripoli, Hague opened his contribution by pointing out ‘I think the first thing to say is that this is not like Iraq.’⁶³⁷

Cameron informed the press that ‘we have learned the lessons from Iraq and past conflicts; there have not been occupying armies, there have not been great big invading forces.’⁶³⁸ The fact that Britain did not have a presence on the ground was consistently presented in exclusively positive terms, and ministers and diplomats clearly failed to anticipate that this factor would hinder their ability to implement any plans that might have been made. The same assumptions were made about the role of the NTC and its future plans. The very fact that these plans had been drawn up by Libyans themselves was seen as sufficient for allaying fears of post-conflict instability. Cameron therefore announced that ‘this is not being dropped out of a NATO aeroplane, this is being delivered by the Libyan people.’⁶³⁹ As Jonathan Powell has since suggested, ‘I do think there were people maybe drawing the wrong lessons from Iraq. They thought we don't want any more Bremers telling them what to do on the ground. Actually, again, you were dealing with a country with no institutions, no tradition at all of how to do this Government. We should have been more proactive.’⁶⁴⁰ It can therefore be concluded that while

⁶³⁵ Liaison Committee, ‘Oral Evidence,’ 24 February 2015, HC 1015, Q 28.

⁶³⁶ Wintour and Watt, ‘Cameron's Libyan War.’

⁶³⁷ FAC ‘Oral and Written Evidence,’ 7 September 2011, Ev 1.

⁶³⁸ Prime Minister's Office, ‘Extracts of Interviews.’

⁶³⁹ *Ibid*; *See also* FCO, ‘Foreign Secretary's Video Message,’ 1 September 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/word/3111455/fs-video-libya>

⁶⁴⁰ FAC, ‘Oral Evidence,’ 9 February 2016, Q. 491.

the lack of well-defined objectives, excessive idealism and ideological self-confidence point to parallels with the Iraq experience, the reality is more complicated than these simple comparisons would suggest.

Liberal Interventionism Versus Liberal Conservatism

As military operations were reaching an apparently successful conclusion, Cameron and Hague were cautious about distilling a new doctrine from the campaign, still less reviving an old one. The Prime Minister did highlight the importance of having the capability to act, of having international and regional support and he explicitly emphasised that the lessons of Iraq should not take precedence over those of Bosnia.⁶⁴¹ His overall rhetorical posture, however, was consistent with the “liberal conservatism” he had outlined when Leader of the Opposition and he sought to present himself as practical and pragmatic in his approach. On 5 September, Cameron told Parliament that “it was a unique set of circumstances and not something that we can or should repeat all over the world.”⁶⁴² When one Conservative member explicitly commended his leader for not “rushing to a new doctrine or going back to an old one like liberal interventionism,” Cameron was grateful, and responded by identifying himself as a “practical, liberal Conservative.”⁶⁴³ Again, on 24 October, the Prime Minister restated this position, telling the Commons that, “I believe it has shown the importance of weighing each situation on its merits and thinking through carefully any decision to intervene in advance”⁶⁴⁴ He went on to warn those who were implicitly pressing for action elsewhere, telling the more hawkish members that “as a liberal Conservative, I believe that a bit of scepticism should be brought to these schemes before we embark on them.”⁶⁴⁵

Hague shared this aversion to any suggestion of foreign policy “doctrine,” referring back to Cameron’s previous remarks when informing the FAC that he had always resisted forming a

⁶⁴¹ See, for example, MOD, “Britain Should be Proud.”

⁶⁴² HC Deb, 05/09/2011, c. 26

⁶⁴³ Ibid., c. 35.

⁶⁴⁴ HC Deb, 24/10/2011, cc. 25-26.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., c. 42.

new doctrine “because you can be sure there will be an event a few days later which is highly inconvenient to the doctrine.”⁶⁴⁶ The Foreign Secretary told the Chair that the most important lesson was Britain retaining “the capacity to act,” but he also stressed the importance of international law and international support.⁶⁴⁷ This was a consistent theme. On 24 March, Hague had reiterated the three criteria that had guided Britain’s decision to intervene, telling Parliament that “the establishment of those principles has put us in a very strong position in relation to the crisis in Libya and those principles would guide us elsewhere.”⁶⁴⁸ When asked again, in June, about the principles that would guide future interventions, Hague informed the House of the importance of the UN, arguing that, “international law is our starting point, which must remain a key principle in the years ahead.”⁶⁴⁹

The Deputy Prime Minister did not share this aversion to foreign policy doctrines, explicitly championing his own version of “liberal interventionism” and celebrating its resuscitation over Libya. Early in the campaign, in a speech in Mexico, Clegg declared that “it would be a terrible mistake if the mistakes of Iraq led to a retreat from the principle of liberal interventionism, from the principle that we have a collective responsibility to support freedom and protect human rights around the world.”⁶⁵⁰ For the Liberal Democrat leader, the lesson of Iraq was “not that intervention in support of liberal aims is always wrong,” but that “such action must only – and must always – be multilaterally sanctioned and driven by humanitarian concerns.”⁶⁵¹ He went on to list what he saw to be the five key differences with the Iraq episode, declaring the current intervention to be “unambiguously legal,” based on a “clear humanitarian case,” with strong support from the region, a greater emphasis on post-conflict stabilisation and “taking place within strict constraints and with clear aims.”⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁶ FAC, “Oral and Written Evidence,” 7 September 2011, Ev. 2.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., Ev. 2, 9-10.

⁶⁴⁸ HC Deb, 24/03/2011, cc. 121-122.

⁶⁴⁹ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 972.

⁶⁵⁰ Clegg, “Axis of Openness.”

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Ibid.

However, and contrary to the claims of Cameron and Hague, to the extent that the Libyan war reveals a clear set of beliefs, principles and assumptions guiding policy, these do not appear to mark a fundamental departure from those associated with the New Labour period. While the impending slaughter in Benghazi might have been the key factor in the minds of those who sanctioned action in March, they also shared a belief that military action would help aid the democratic transformation they saw taking place across the region. The Srebrenica argument gave way to what we might term the “Arab Spring argument,” and policy-makers simply took for granted that the continuing use of military force, regardless of the constraints of the UN resolution, would help aid the incipient spread of democratization in the Arab world. In explaining and justifying the military effort, Libya was not in fact treated as an isolated case, but instead was situated in this wider narrative. In his statement to Parliament following the death of Osama Bin Laden in May, Cameron acknowledged the “lessons” of the past that members of Parliament were articulating, but his optimistic commitment to spread democracy appeared to set him apart. While the Prime Minister conceded that “we have to learn the lessons of successes and failures of past interventions,” he immediately added that “it seems to me that there are some constants in all of this, one of which is that the promotion of democracy and freedom, along with what I would call the building blocks of democracy, is almost everywhere a good thing to do. In as much as we learn the lessons of interventions of the past, I hope that we hold on to that.”⁶⁵³

Cameron’s approach, and by extension that of the Coalition government more broadly, can be defined as liberal interventionist both because it used force in the service of objectives that clearly extended beyond civilian protection and because it over-estimated the efficacy of military action in achieving these ends. The government’s defence review had claimed that future military deployments would only be sanctioned with a “clear strategic aim” and a “viable exit strategy,” yet neither of these was entirely clear in the case of Libya.⁶⁵⁴ As the analysis in this chapter has shown, underpinning the Libyan intervention was an optimistic and

⁶⁵³ HC Deb, 03/05/2011, cc. 466-467.

⁶⁵⁴ HM Government, *Strategic Defence and Security Review*, 17.

idealistic assumption that simply removing the incumbent government through force would fulfil the promise of the Arab Spring. The opportunity for a mediated solution was never seriously pursued and the civilian intervention, to the extent that that existed, was premised on a light footprint approach regardless of the greater rhetorical emphasis on post-conflict planning. Throughout the conflict, Cameron was heavily involved in every detail, and some cabinet colleagues complained of their leader's "personal obsession."⁶⁵⁵ Yet as soon Gaddafi was defeated on the battlefield, political attention shifted elsewhere, reflecting the fact that the Coalition government, much like its New Labour predecessor, viewed military action as a quick fix solution and a means of spreading its values around the world.

Such an approach was facilitated by the government's framing of the Arab Spring, which forced Cameron and others away from the contradictions of "liberal conservatism" toward a world-view that was seemingly devoid of the "scepticism of grand designs" claimed to be a key part of this approach. Garnett, Mabon and Smith argue that "Cameron had emulated American neoconservatives who imagined that the Middle East and North Africa were swarming with individuals who were desperate for the chance to implement liberal democratic institutions."⁶⁵⁶ Such an assertion is arguably stretching the point slightly, but it is true that the world-view of those who enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to remove Gaddafi was eerily similar to the simplistic good versus evil narrative that was present in much of Blair's crusading rhetoric. The government saw the Arab Spring as proof that western values were "universal values" and "the natural aspirations of people everywhere."⁶⁵⁷

Rightly or wrongly, the government did not see the regional unrest as an opportunity for extremists but celebrated it as signalling their irrelevance. Libya, rather than assessed on its own merits, was viewed through the prism of prior events in Tunisia and Egypt and military success

⁶⁵⁵ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 113.

⁶⁵⁶ Garnett, Mabon and Smith, *British Foreign Policy*, 312.

⁶⁵⁷ See, for example, Clegg, "Axis of Openness,"; Hague, "Continue to Fight,"; FCO, "The Arab Spring: Freedom and Dignity, Not Guns and Hatred," 12 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-arab-spring-freedom-and-dignity-not-guns-and-hatred>; Hague, "Helping the Arab Spring,".

was heralded as vindicating the idealism that policy-makers expounded. In a speech to the British Council following the rebel takeover of Tripoli, Clegg announced that “the momentum for change is breathtaking and, for the cynics who said change wasn’t possible, who had written off the Libyan uprising, written off the Arab Spring, clearly, they were wrong.”⁶⁵⁸ Even Hague, who was less hawkish and more pragmatic than Cameron, persistently stuck to this framing of events. When one member of Parliament suggested that the removal of Gaddafi might potentially leave Libya in a worse state of affairs, the Foreign Secretary dismissed such a prospect by saying “the hon. Gentleman has left the House trying to imagine a regime worse than the Gaddafi regime over the last 42 years. I suppose that is theoretically possible, but on the basis of my visit to Benghazi and meeting the people there, who have an inspiring commitment to freedom and a better future for their country, I can tell him that huge numbers of Libyans are going through what they are going through now in order to have a dramatically better situation.”⁶⁵⁹

The Coalition government took efforts to demonstrate it was abiding by international law and acting in harmony with regional opinion, both in its decision to intervene and the conduct of operations throughout the campaign. The greater priority given to these factors reflected the political fallout from past conflicts. The Attorney General was present at many of the key meetings of the NSC and as the analysis in this chapter has shown, a desire to avoid openly transgressing international law was a constraint on British military action. Yet such facts must be weighed in the balance. Cameron showed a willingness to intervene without having first secured a UN resolution and the official position of the government was its “doctrine of humanitarian intervention” provides legal cover for military action with or without UN approval, a position that certainly places Britain outside of mainstream international opinion on this issue.⁶⁶⁰ Additionally, while seeking to conduct operations within the remit of UN 1973, the

⁶⁵⁸ Clegg, “Speech on Arab Spring.”

⁶⁵⁹ HC Deb, 19/07/2011, c. 781.

⁶⁶⁰ Defence Committee, “Written Evidence from the Ministry of Defence,” 7 October 2013, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/952/952vw02.htm>; Defence Committee, *Intervention: Why, When and How?* HC 952, 28 April 2014, 4.

analysis in this chapter has shown that this was primarily a byproduct of the needs of alliance unity and even then, the government stretched the interpretation of the civilian protection mandate beyond breaking point, using air power to aid the offensive actions of one side in a civil war, inserting its own special forces to assist in these efforts, and facilitating transgressions of the UN arms embargo. Above all, the mandate provided by the UN did not alter the true nature of British objectives, which stretched well beyond a narrowly defined civilian protection agenda.

In conclusion, Libya showed that despite a change of government and a change of party, post-Iraq Britain was still willing to use military force not simply to protect civilians from widespread harm, but for the purpose of spreading freedom and democracy. In pursuing this agenda, the British government prioritised a military solution to the conflict, ignoring potential opportunities for mediation, glossing over the difficulties that would be faced in the transition period and authorising actions that were, at the very least, a violation of the spirit of the UN resolution they claimed to be enforcing. Such a policy was at odds with the “liberal conservatism” behind which Cameron and others cloaked their crusading and contradicted the claims and planning assumptions made in the SDSR. Such a conclusion is not simply about labelling doctrines for the sake of intellectual clarity. Its importance rests on the role that these assumptions, beliefs and inclinations had in shaping the government’s objectives in Libya, its willingness to use force in pursuit of these objectives, and its assessment of the likely consequences of different courses of action.

Chapter Five: Syria: The Search for a UN Resolution

Unrest in Syria coincided, almost to the day, with the commencement of military operations against Colonel Gaddafi's forces. On 18 March, demonstrations in the province of Deraa sparked the beginning of a protest movement against the government of Bashar Assad. While moving at a slower pace, the unrest initially followed a similar pattern to its counterparts across the region, dispelling the misplaced assumption that President Assad would be immune to the Arab revolutions.⁶⁶¹ Yet unlike events elsewhere, the dictator's determination to cling to power, the increasing brutality of his security forces and the willingness of his opponents to take up arms gradually dragged the country toward civil war, ultimately leading to what many regard as the worst humanitarian disaster of the twenty first century. By the end of the period reviewed in this chapter, the UN estimated that the conflict had already claimed 20,000 lives, produced 220,000 refugees and left 2.5 million people in "grave need of assistance."⁶⁶² Even as early as the summer of 2011, the severity of the violence and the apparent parallels with Libya were sufficient to raise serious questions about how the international community would or should respond. Syria has subsequently become a test case for the principle of humanitarian intervention, or R2P as its advocates prefer.⁶⁶³ In Parliament and the press, the assumption that intervening in Libya while failing to do so in Syria was evidence of inconsistency or double

⁶⁶¹ The assumption that Syria was somehow different from other Arab countries was made by both Assad himself and many Western diplomats. See HC Deb, 26/04/2011 c. 39; ICG, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 108, 6 July 2011, 3.

⁶⁶² United Nations, "Security Council, Meeting on Situation in Syria, Shifts Focus to Plight of Externally, Internally Displaced Persons," 30 August 2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10752.doc.htm>

⁶⁶³ Morris, "Libya and Syria,"; Alex Bellamy, "From Tripoli to Damascus? Lesson Learning and the Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect," *International Politics* 51, no. 1 (2014): 23-44; Thomas Weiss, "Military Humanitarianism: Syria Hasn't Killed It," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2014): 7-20.

standards was not uncommon.⁶⁶⁴ This assumption has made its way into some academic commentary on Britain's Syria policy.⁶⁶⁵

This chapter draws upon Hansard, the rolling inquiries of the FAC and the Liaison Committee and interviews and speeches given by government ministers during this period to analyse Britain's role within the wider international response to the Syrian conflict. It focuses on the period between March 2011, when the unrest in Syria began, and July 2012, when Russia and China exercised their third veto at the UN Security Council. Britain was at the forefront of international efforts to isolate and condemn Damascus. The government publicly called for Assad's departure from power and committed itself to this objective, introducing multiple waves of EU sanctions and attempting to use its position within the UN Security Council to sanction and pressure the Assad government. This strategy was to prove almost entirely ineffective and on three separate occasions during this period British diplomatic activism was curtailed by Russian and Chinese vetoes. The third and last of these ended the diminishing hopes of successful outside mediation, with UN envoy Kofi Annan resigning in frustration.

This chapter examines the emergence and development of Britain's anti-Assad diplomatic strategy and the assumptions, motivations and structural pressures that shaped it. The first four sections of this chapter develop a more or less chronological narrative. The first section traces the response to the early stages of the unrest, focusing on the period between March and August 2011. It shows how during this period British policy sought to use diplomatic condemnation and economic sanctions to pressure the Assad government into adopting radical reforms. It further demonstrates that Britain was prevented from going as far as the government might have liked in its condemnation of Assad, with divisions in the international community and Britain's lack of leverage in Damascus preventing the adoption of a more hawkish position.

⁶⁶⁴ See, for example, Prime Minister's Office, "Morning Press Briefing," 1 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/number-10-press-briefing-morning-for-1-august-2011>; FAC, "Oral Evidence," 7 September 2011, Ev. 9; Prime Minister's Office, "EU Council," 2 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/european-council>

⁶⁶⁵ Holman, "Price of Influence."

In August 2011 Britain publicly called for Assad's departure in a move coordinated with other Western governments, including the US. The second section analyses the motives behind this decision and its importance in the development of British policy. Henceforward, Britain would pursue a policy of democratic regime change, much in the same way that it had done for Libya, albeit without the military means to fulfil this ambitious agenda. The analysis in this section shows how the decision to call for Assad's departure was driven primarily by an idealistic framing of the Arab Spring and the moral conviction of policy-makers, with domestic political pressure and miscalculation also playing a part.

Following the call for regime change in Damascus, Britain launched a major effort to secure a UN Resolution imposing sanctions on Syria in October 2011. This resolution was vetoed by Russia and China. A second, weaker resolution was tabled in February 2012 following a further deterioration in the violence and an explicit request from the Arab League for the international community to support its peace plan. That too was vetoed by Russia and China, in a move that left British policy at a dead-end. The third section analyses these developments in more detail, in addition to Britain's support for the Arab League's peace plan. It shows the full extent of the diplomatic divisions British policy had to confront, arguing that these presented a series of insurmountable constraints.

After the second Russian-Chinese veto at the UN in February 2012, Kofi Annan was appointed as the joint envoy of the UN and the Arab League in their search for a solution to the Syrian conflict. Ostensibly, support for the "Annan Plan" formed the basis of British policy in the period between February and July 2012. This section continues the theme developed previously, showing how British policy was undermined by the government's lack of leverage and continued divisions in the Security Council. However, this section also argues that despite a sincere preference for diplomatic or political solutions, Britain continued to adopt an unrealistic, uncompromising and ideologically rigid position by insisting on Assad's immediate removal from power and threatening a "day of reckoning" for those believed to be guilty of crimes against humanity. This position, it is suggested, undermined the prospects of Annan's mediation

efforts succeeding. The final section examines separately the possibility of alternatives to the diplomatic strategy Britain adopted, looking specifically at the prospect of military intervention or providing arms to the rebels. It shows that the US adopted a cautious approach and from the British perspective, intervention without American support was simply not possible. Secondly, it shows that the risks and limitations of arming the opposition were much greater than its contemporary advocates assumed.

Three core arguments emerge from this analysis. Firstly, Britain's approach to the Syrian crisis was driven by many of the same beliefs and assumptions that underpinned the intervention in Libya, albeit such beliefs did not automatically lead to a military response on this occasion. Policymakers saw the Syrian crisis through the lens of the Arab Spring and adopted a strong moral framing of events and the options before them. They publicly committed themselves to a policy of regime change, a decision that was more the product of idealism and moral conviction than a judicious evaluation of what was practicable. While ostensibly preferring a diplomatic solution and supporting the efforts of Kofi Annan, British policy again showed an ambiguous relationship between the twin goals of justice and peace. Secondly, Britain's room for manoeuvre was seriously constrained by the international environment. Divisions in the EU, the Arab League and the UN all prevented the adoption of a stronger position and the British government had very little leverage to wield in Damascus. This often led to a mismatch between the objective of regime change and the bellicose condemnation of Assad's repression on the one hand, and the substance of British policy on the other. Thirdly, military intervention was simply not possible without US leadership and arming the opposition would have been an exceptionally high risk strategy. British policy was therefore shaped more by the geopolitical constraints and diplomatic divisions it confronted, rather than by the prominence of a more cautious, conservative or pragmatic streak in official thinking.

Syria and the Arab Spring

In March 2011 the Syrian government arrested and tortured a group of children for painting anti-government graffiti.⁶⁶⁶ These repressive actions sparked protests in the southern city of Deraa on 18 March. The protest movement then gradually spread, driven by deeper, more underlying grievances such as lack of employment opportunities and anger with government corruption and unaccountable security forces. The uprising therefore had obvious parallels with contemporary events across the region and the contagion effect was an important facilitator of the unrest. The Assad government fuelled the growth of the crisis through its inability to implement meaningful reform and its willingness to use excessive force in responding to its opponents. Its resort to greater levels of violence soon invited comparisons with Colonel Gaddafi.

The interpretive frame through which the British government perceived events in Syria drew upon the wider narrative of an ‘‘Arab Spring.’’⁶⁶⁷ As described in previous chapters, this narrative was consistent with a liberal or idealist tradition of thinking. Contrary to the Prime Minister’s self-presentation as someone who made decisions on a case by case basis, Syria was located *within* a wider story about the global spread of democracy and the upending of longstanding assumptions about the Middle East. As had been the case for Libya, this interpretive frame automatically lent the crisis an importance that went well beyond the fate of a local uprising. The discourse surrounding the Arab Spring imbued it with a sense of historical purpose that raised the stakes both strategically and symbolically. The importance of this point was clearest during the Prime Minister’s first speech to the United Nations in September. Cameron called on other members to impose strong sanctions against Damascus, but he nestled this demand within an optimistic account of what he saw as the region’s democratic awakening. Invoking parallels with the fall of the Berlin Wall and heralding what he portrayed as the

⁶⁶⁶ For background on the unrest see ICG, *Slow Motion Revolution* and ICG, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109, 13 July 2011.

⁶⁶⁷ Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, ‘‘Before The Vote,’’ 882-886.

historic liberation of Libya, Cameron declared, “my argument today is that Libya and the Arab Spring shows the UN needs a new way of working. Because the Arab Spring is a massive opportunity to spread peace, prosperity, democracy and vitally security but only if we really seize it.” It was within this wider context that he argued, “and above all, on Syria, it is time for Members of the Security Council to act.”⁶⁶⁸ Viewing Syria through the prism of the Arab Spring, the British government felt compelled to take what it regarded as a forward stand against the regime of Bashar Assad.

The government also adopted a strong moral framing of the crisis, one that only hardened as the crisis escalated in the weeks and months ahead. This often hinted at parallels with the Libyan case. Indeed, Hague explicitly placed the two in the same category in his statement to Parliament on 29 June, speaking of Britain’s desire to “stand up to repression and violence, which we have seen taken to extremes in Libya and Syria”⁶⁶⁹ and in his testimony before the FAC in September, he admitted that Syria provided the “closest analogy” with Libya “because that is another country where the incumbent Government have set about systematically, to a degree, killing large numbers of their own population.”⁶⁷⁰ Phrases such as “appalling,” “brutal” and “utterly unacceptable” conveyed a growing sense of moral outrage.⁶⁷¹ The British government’s condemnation also conveyed an innate preference for action over inaction. While often dampening expectations and pointing to the constraints afflicting British diplomacy during this period, ministers were equally adamant that, in Hague’s words, “democratic nations

⁶⁶⁸ David Cameron, “Speech to the UN General Assembly,” 22 September 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-first-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly>

⁶⁶⁹ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 957

⁶⁷⁰ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 7 September 2011, Ev. 9.

⁶⁷¹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM Interview at the G8 summit’, 27 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-interview-at-the-g8-summit>; Prime Minister’s Office, “European Council Press Conference,” 24 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/european-council-press-conference-24-june-2011>; HC Deb, 06/02/2012, c. 23; FCO, “Foreign Office Minister: Brutal Repression in Syria Must Stop,” 23 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-office-minister-brutal-repression-in-syria-must-stop>

cannot stay silent in the face of such acts.’’⁶⁷² In one of his earliest public interventions on the crisis, Cameron spoke in similar terms, telling Parliament that ‘‘of course, we must not stand silent in the face of those outrages, and we will not.’’⁶⁷³ Not taking a strong and principled stand was thereby implicitly construed as moral indifference and a betrayal of values that foreign policy was claimed to uphold.

Britain’s approach to the unfolding conflict in Syria was appropriately described by one official as the ‘‘escalator of pressure.’’⁶⁷⁴ Every deterioration in the situation or perceived act of defiance by Damascus would be met with a corresponding and proportionate escalation in diplomatic pressure and condemnation. At the end of April, Hague announced that Syria was at a ‘‘fork in the road.’’⁶⁷⁵ Either the government could introduce meaningful reforms, or Britain and its allies would ‘‘take measures, including sanctions.’’⁶⁷⁶ By June, mirroring similar statements from Hillary Clinton, the British position was that Bashar Assad was ‘‘losing legitimacy’’ and should ‘‘reform or step aside.’’⁶⁷⁷ Metaphors such as the ‘‘fork in the road’’ and public judgements quantifying Assad’s diminishing ‘‘legitimacy’’ logically implied there would soon come a point where Western governments would call for his departure.

Furthermore, such pronouncements were often coupled with vague and implicit threats, suggesting that such a position was not just a bystander’s judgement about the deteriorating crisis, but a representation of a growing will to take a stand against the Syrian government.

Alistair Burt, the Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for the Middle East, recalled of the subsequent decision to call for Assad’s departure that, ‘‘we reached a point where you either said something about this or in some way you were implying that he [Assad] could be dealt with even though the killing was mounting up.’’⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷² FCO, ‘‘Foreign Secretary Meets US Secretary of State,’’ 24 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-meets-us-secretary-of-state>

⁶⁷³ HC Deb, 08/06/2011, c. 151.

⁶⁷⁴ Quoted in Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 76.

⁶⁷⁵ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, cc. 33-36.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid*, c. 35.

⁶⁷⁷ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 32.

⁶⁷⁸ Quoted in Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 81.

Emphasising Syria's place as part of the Arab Spring and foregrounding the need to condemn the repression led the government to downplay some of the differences between unrest in Syria and similar events in other parts of the region. A number of important factors were particular to the Syrian context.⁶⁷⁹ Firstly, while revolutions in other Arab countries had developed rapidly, Syria's uprising was a comparatively slow-moving affair. Secondly, while it was typically Arab capitals that had been the focus of popular unrest, in Syria the revolt was more provincial, as there were few protests in Damascus and Aleppo. Thirdly, the country's confessional heterogeneity and its bordering with Iraq and Lebanon, both countries with a recent experience of sectarian violence, added an additional complicating factor. Fourthly, as the conflict developed, its secular and democratic origins receded and its religious and sectarian dimensions became increasingly important.⁶⁸⁰ There is some evidence suggesting these latter dynamics were present from a relatively early stage.⁶⁸¹ An understanding of these important factors was largely absent from the government's framing of the crisis.

The favourable diplomatic circumstances that made it possible to mobilize the international community against Gaddafi were absent in the Syrian case. Cameron and Hague pointed to this key difference to defend British policy against charges of inconsistency.⁶⁸² Typical in this regard were Cameron's remarks in an interview with Sir David Frost in September, when the Prime Minister summarized the argument: "as I said I don't think there's a direct read across from Libya to Syria because the case of Libya there was UN support, there was Arab backing, there was Arab League backing, but in Syria I would like us to do more and to take a more forward position."⁶⁸³ The exclusive focus on these diplomatic constraints implied that the

⁶⁷⁹ ICG, *Slow Motion Revolution*.

⁶⁸⁰ ICG, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report No. 131, 12 October 2012.

⁶⁸¹ Hala Jaber, "Syria Caught in Crossfire of Extremists," *Sunday Times*, 26 June 2011.

⁶⁸² For early examples illustrative of this pattern, see, in particular, Hague's comments before the FAC in September 2011, FAC, "Oral Evidence," 7 September 2011, Ev. 2, 9. See also HC Deb, 26/04/2011, cc. 33-58; HC Deb, 29/06/2011, cc. 957-976; HC Deb, 19/07/2011, cc. 771-773; HC Deb, 17/01/2012, cc. 609-616.

⁶⁸³ Prime Minister's Office, "Al Jazeera Interview."

government was being prevented from adopting a more hawkish position not because it assessed the violence in Syria to be fundamentally different from similar scenes in Libya, but because the position taken by other states prevented a stronger response. The only other factor that was pointed to as an important difference from the Libyan case was the lack of unity within the Syrian opposition. However, reference to this factor was not made until November 2011 and while it gained increased attention in the months ahead, it was still generally treated as of secondary importance to the diplomatic divisions.⁶⁸⁴

From the beginning of the crisis, Hague warned Parliament that ‘‘we must recognise our limited leverage in Syria, but we are exercising that leverage that we do have.’’⁶⁸⁵ The prospect of a resolution like 1973, he acknowledged in an interview in the summer of 2011, was ‘‘so hypothetical as to be academic’’ and Britain therefore would ‘‘have to work at this in other ways.’’⁶⁸⁶ This led to a dissonance between ends and means or, as Ralph, Holland and Zhekova have put it, a ‘‘plausibility gap’’ in British policy.⁶⁸⁷ The strong moral framing described above and its corresponding pledges of action could not be matched with an effective strategy for as long as the majority of other states did not share the British view. The British strategy therefore necessarily relied on multilateralism and the construction of international unity. The goal was to build and maintain as wide as possible a diplomatic alliance in favour of increasingly punitive measures, hopefully culminating in a strong position from the UN Security Council. The initial objective was to use the threat of future sanctions to encourage the Syrian government to pacify the demonstrators through radical reform, as was suggested by the ‘‘fork in the road’’ analogy.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁴ HC Deb, 28/11/2011, c. 688. *See also* Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘UK-France Summit,’’ 17 February 2012; Liaison Committee, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ HC 150, 6 March 2012, Ev. 76-77.

⁶⁸⁵ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 47.

⁶⁸⁶ FCO, ‘‘Foreign Secretary: Situation in Syria Very Serious,’’ 12 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-situation-in-syria-very-serious>

⁶⁸⁷ Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, ‘‘Before The Vote,’’ 885.

⁶⁸⁸ For summaries of this strategy, *see* HC Deb, 26/04/2011, cc. 35; HC Deb, 07/06/2011, cc. 32-33.

The position taken by Britain's P3 allies mirrored their reaction to events in Libya. France was the most hawkish member of the international community and British and French diplomats often worked together, in both the EU and UN, attempting to build consensus in favour of stronger measures.⁶⁸⁹ The US position was more measured in contrast and the Obama administration remained divided between realists and idealists.⁶⁹⁰ Although the latter momentarily gained the upper hand in the summer of 2011, Obama saw Syria both as a low priority for US strategic interests and as potential quagmire to be avoided.⁶⁹¹ What Cameron regarded as Obama's excessive caution would come to be seen as an obstacle for British policymakers.⁶⁹² Buoyed by the apparent success of their Libyan intervention, British officials behind the scenes were working to "push the boundaries" of US Syria policy.⁶⁹³

Working through the EU potentially gave the government a greater platform from which to pressure Assad, but other EU member states did not want to go as far as Britain and France. British leverage was therefore still limited. The EU moved to sanction Damascus at the end of April, first introducing an arms embargo and following this with targeted sanctions at the beginning of May.⁶⁹⁴ These measures were then extended to President Assad himself at the end of the month.⁶⁹⁵ The delay in adopting this latter option can be explained by the reticence of some member states, including Germany.⁶⁹⁶ In any case, targeted sanctions were of limited value. While each wave was typically accompanied by bold claims to be sending a "strong signal" on one occasion Hague was to concede that their tangible impact would be minimal. As he candidly warned one MP: "they are a demonstration of our strong view rather than

⁶⁸⁹ For French policy, see Uitley, "France and the Arab Upheavals."

⁶⁹⁰ Mann, *Obamians*, 270-280.

⁶⁹¹ Goldberg, "Obama Doctrine."

⁶⁹² Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 328; D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 355

⁶⁹³ Quoted in Ralph, Holland, and Zhekova, "Before The Vote," 883.

⁶⁹⁴ FCO, "Foreign Secretary Welcomes EU Sanctions on Those Responsible for Syrian Violence," 11 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-welcomes-eu-sanctions-on-those-responsible-for-syrian-violence>

⁶⁹⁵ FCO, "Foreign Secretary Welcomes EU Decision to Sanction the Syrian President," 23 May 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-welcomes-eu-sanctions-on-those-responsible-for-syrian-violence>

⁶⁹⁶ Tobias Schumacher, "The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 3 (2011): 107-119.

something that will transform the situation.’⁶⁹⁷ The EU’s longstanding policy has been to avoid the imposition of comprehensive sanctions, out of fear of their negative humanitarian impact.⁶⁹⁸ As the EU was a significant market for Syrian oil, some member states might also have felt their interests would be adversely affected by such a move.⁶⁹⁹ While some British politicians were calling for an oil embargo, there was therefore not even a discussion of this prospect until at least as late as July.⁷⁰⁰ For the first few months of the crisis, British policy was therefore limited to measures that were mostly symbolic in their value.

From the outset, British diplomatic efforts at the UN were obstructed not just by the possibility of Russian and Chinese vetoes, but by a broader wave of scepticism from the BRICS states.⁷⁰¹ Britain circulated a draft resolution in June, calling for release of prisoners of conscience, the lifting of media restrictions and cooperation with the UNHRC, but with a lack of support readily apparent it was never formally tabled.⁷⁰² Ministers had to consistently play down the prospects of securing a resolution in the face of widespread expectation of a strong UN response. As Hague informed MPs, such a resolution was ‘‘not in our gift.’’⁷⁰³ The most the Security Council could muster was a presidential statement, and even this step was not reached until August, following further escalation in the violence.⁷⁰⁴

The Arab League did not act with the same degree of urgency and unity that it had displayed during the Libyan crisis. As Hague explained in July, ‘‘it has not been possible for the Arab League to arrive at a clear, strong position, which makes the situation entirely different to that in Libya, where the Arab League called on the international community to assist and

⁶⁹⁷ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 47.

⁶⁹⁸ Erica Moret, ‘‘Humanitarian Impacts of Economic Sanctions on Iran and Syria,’’ *European Security* 24, no. 1 (2015): 120-140

⁶⁹⁹ The EU market was responsible for approximately 90% of Syrian oil exports. See FAC, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 7 September 2011, Ev. 10-11.

⁷⁰⁰ HC Deb 23/06/2011, 423W; HC Deb, 13/07/2011, 386W.

⁷⁰¹ For a first-hand account of relevant divisions here, see Puri, *Perilous Interventions*, Ch. 4. For a more systematic overview of the context, see Thakur, ‘‘R2P after Libya and Syria.’’

⁷⁰² HC Deb 07/06/11 c. 32; HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 958.

⁷⁰³ HC Deb, 07/06/2011, c. 32.

⁷⁰⁴ UN Security Council, ‘‘Statement by the President of the Security Council,’’ S/PRST/2011/16, 3 August 2011.

intervene.’’⁷⁰⁵ Syria’s location at the heart of some of the region’s confessional fault lines and the recent experience of sectarian conflict in neighbours Iraq and Lebanon ensured all regional players had more to fear from the prospect of major instability. Assad could also rely on strong support from Iran and had closer links with Qatar. Doha attempted to use its bilateral ties to persuade Assad to adopt reforms, but even following the Qatari decision to abandon Assad in July, the League was unable to adopt a unified position until the autumn.⁷⁰⁶ For as long as Arab states remained divided on this issue, Britain’s ability to propose strong measures was limited.

The Turkish position was also a relevant factor. In addition to its geographical proximity, Turkey enjoyed growing economic links and strong personal ties between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Assad. Turkey’s ambitions to play a more high-profile regional role under the AKP had also been given a fillip by the Arab revolutions and much like Qatar, it saw the upheaval as an opportunity to bolster its claims to leadership.⁷⁰⁷ Given Britain’s own lack of influence in Damascus, working through key regional allies was necessary and Turkey was especially important in this regard. Hague explained that ‘‘I regard them as holding a central position in working with other nations on how we should proceed on Syria’’⁷⁰⁸ and Cameron pledged that Britain would be ‘‘side by side with them.’’⁷⁰⁹ Turkey followed Qatar in seeking to utilise its existing ties to encourage the regime to reform, but to the extent that it persisted for too long in such efforts, it undermined any strategy that called for unified condemnation of Assad. It is no surprise that the public call for Assad’s departure did not arrive until after both Turkey and Qatar had abandoned their mediation efforts.

The presence of these constraints and the obvious limits of British leverage in Damascus necessitated a degree of patience and sometimes led to a lowest common denominator

⁷⁰⁵ HC Deb, 19/07/2011, c. 772. *See also* HC Deb 07/06/2011, c. 38.

⁷⁰⁶ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 88-89.

⁷⁰⁷ Philip Robins, ‘‘Turkey’s ‘Double Gravity’ Predicament: The Foreign Policy of a Newly Activist Power,’’ *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 381-397; Crystal Ennis and Bessma Momani, ‘‘Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies,’’ *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 6 (2013):1127-1144.

⁷⁰⁸ HC Deb, 26/04/2011, c. 39

⁷⁰⁹ HC Deb, 27/06/2011, c. 619.

approach, whereby the diplomatic posture adopted simply reflected the strongest position to which other key states were willing to acquiesce. For example, when one MP advocated declaring that Assad had “lost legitimacy” as early as June, Hague responded by pointing out that “if we are to maintain international unity of pressure on Syria, we must be careful how we phrase such things.”⁷¹⁰ It is also worth recalling that at the outset of the crisis and through much of 2011, the British government was responding to multiple crises simultaneously. The presence of unrest in other Arab countries, the ongoing operations in Libya and the Japanese nuclear disaster at Fukushima meant that British policy suffered from what officials referred to as a “lack of bandwidth.”⁷¹¹ According to Seldon and Snowdon, Cameron was preoccupied with the conflict in Libya during this period and Syria therefore had to “take a backseat.”⁷¹² Nonetheless, it would be quite wrong to characterise British policy as passive. Within the boundaries of what was possible, the British government was working consistently to coax other members of the international community into the adoption of more coercive measures. By August 2011, changing calculations in Washington, Doha and Ankara would provide the opportunity for what, from the British perspective, would be a welcome shift in a more interventionist direction.

The Call for Regime Change

As violence escalated during Ramadan, President Obama issued a statement calling for Assad to depart power, in a move coordinated with Western allies.⁷¹³ Britain issued a joint statement with France and Germany, which condemned “this bloody repression of peaceful and courageous demonstrators and the massive violations of human rights which President Assad and his authorities have been committing for months” and called for regime change in Damascus:

⁷¹⁰ HC Deb, 29/06/2011, c. 975.

⁷¹¹ Quoted in Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 64.

⁷¹² Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 326.

⁷¹³ The White House, “President Obama: ‘The Future of Syria Must be Determined by its People, but President Bashar al-Assad is Standing in their Way,’” 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>

Our three countries believe that President Assad, who is resorting to brutal military force against his own people and who is responsible for the situation, has lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the country. We call on him to face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people.⁷¹⁴

In his analysis of this key development in the international response, Christopher Phillips has emphasised the importance of domestic political pressure and miscalculation in explaining the actions of Western governments.⁷¹⁵ He also shows how such pressure was shaped by a wider mood of idealism and a need to be “on the right side of history.”⁷¹⁶ This account is primarily focused on the US position, but Phillips suggests such factors were equally applicable for other Western governments and that the British decision was the product of “domestic considerations along with the mistaken belief in Assad’s inevitable fall.”⁷¹⁷ While these are important factors in shaping the British position, this interpretation requires further qualification.

The Arab Spring undoubtedly encouraged a consistently idealistic and optimistic view of the Syrian uprising. This optimism was further reinforced by the apparent success of the intervention in Libya following the sudden liberation of Tripoli in August. Having declared in a triumphantly idealist speech that “the direction of travel is set,” Clegg announced that Assad was now “as irrelevant to Syria’s future as Qadhafi is to Libya’s.”⁷¹⁸ The idealism surrounding regional developments encouraged the Coalition leaders to make positive predictions about the country’s political trajectory, predictions that were difficult to backtrack from in the months and years ahead. In April 2012, still taking his cue from events in Tahrir Square, the British Foreign Secretary argued that:

⁷¹⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, “Joint UK, French and German Statement on Syria,” 18 August 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-uk-french-and-german-statement-on-syria>

⁷¹⁵ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 79-82.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷¹⁸ Clegg, “Speech on Arab Spring.”

President Assad cannot crush the spirit of the Syrian people... One of the lessons of the Arab Spring is that if a dictatorial regime sets out to try to eliminate by force the desire for freedom and democracy of a very large part of their population then they will fail and that is why we remain convinced that this is a doomed regime. That is a question of time, a matter of time.⁷¹⁹

The assumption that Assad's fall from power was both inevitable and, if not imminent, a likely short-term outcome, was widespread across Western government and diplomatic circles throughout 2011 and 2012. This is acknowledged in the autobiographies of key players within the US administration and emphasised in those accounts that draw on interviews with key decision-makers during this period.⁷²⁰ However, while such assumptions were widespread, they were not universal. Obama himself, despite making the decision to publicly call for regime change in Damascus, was less optimistic than the majority of his staffers about the prospects for Assad's sudden removal. Ben Rhodes, a senior advisor on foreign policy, recalls the President saying at the time that "Syria could be a longer slog than we think."⁷²¹ Faulty assumptions about the frailty of the regime were understandable, but not inevitable.

More importantly, as Phillips himself has demonstrated, the idea that Assad's fall was imminent was being discouraged by the ambassadors in Damascus. Britain's Ambassador Simon Collis believed that it would require major protests in Damascus, Aleppo and the Kurdish regions, in addition to a collapse in the cohesion and effectiveness of the army and security services and weakness in the regime's inner core.⁷²² American and French diplomats reached similar conclusions and cautioned against publicly calling for regime change, but this counsel was seemingly overruled.⁷²³ The British government therefore appears to have reached a premature

⁷¹⁹ FCO, "Foreign Secretary Discusses Events in Syria," 1 April 2012,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-discusses-events-in-syria>

⁷²⁰ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 460, Ben Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 13; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 77; BBC, *Syria: The World's War*, Episode 1, BBC Documentary, 2018,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0b1v4jp/syria-the-worlds-war-series-1-episode-1>.

⁷²¹ Rhodes, *World As It Is*, *ibid*.

⁷²² Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 78.

⁷²³ *Ibid*. See also BBC, *The World's War*, Episode 1 for US Ambassador Robert Ford's recollection.

conclusion on the future of Assad, at least in part, by ignoring the person best placed to offer an informed verdict. An assessment that stresses the role of miscalculation must therefore also acknowledge how this miscalculation arose and that its existence was symptomatic of a particular world-view and framing of events, one that exuded ideological confidence in the historic march of values that were part of the Arab Spring.

It is true that the British government faced political pressure, with the strong response to Libya having established a precedent and raised expectations in both the press and Parliament. As early as 27 May, in an interview following the G8 Summit, Cameron had to duck a journalist's question about whether military force was being considered.⁷²⁴ In the build up to the public call for regime change in August, the media were pressing Number 10 on why Syria was so different to Libya and if and when the British government would call for Assad to leave power.⁷²⁵ The lack of media access to the country and the role of Syrian exiles in shaping Western political discourse on the conflict reinforced a simple, moralistic, black and white framing of events.⁷²⁶ This was further encouraged by clear instances of misreporting, such as false claims that the Syrian government was firing on its own soldiers for their alleged refusal to shoot demonstrators.⁷²⁷ Finally, NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also added to the pressure. In addition to reporting facts about the conflict, these organizations introduced a moral framing which was far from politically neutral and began pushing for their favoured prescriptions, lending their authority to calls for the international community to adopt sanctions or refer the situation to the

⁷²⁴ Prime Minister's Office, "Interview at G8 Summit."

⁷²⁵ Prime Minister's Office, "Morning Press Briefing," 1 August 2011.

⁷²⁶ On the lack of media access, see Bowen, *Arab Uprisings*, 111-132. On the role of exiles in shaping Western views of the conflict, see Anthony Shadid, "Exiles Shaping World's Image of Syria Revolt," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/world/middleeast/24beirut.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁷²⁷ On the controversies surrounding the shooting of soldiers, see Joshua Landis, "Western Press Mised – Who Shot the Nine Soldiers in Banyas? Not Syrian Security Force," Syria Comment, 13 April 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/western-press-mised-who-shot-the-nine-soldiers-in-banyas-not-syrian-security-forces/>; Joshua Landis, "The Armed Gangs Controversy," Syria Comment, 2 August 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-armed-gangs-controversy/>

ICC.⁷²⁸ British officials have since noted that Cameron called for more action from the Foreign Office after the lobbying efforts of groups like Amnesty and editorials in the *Economist*.⁷²⁹

However, the political pressure the British government faced during this period was not all-encompassing. Those factors described above undoubtedly played their part in shaping the framing of the options and made a policy of caution and restraint harder to defend, but they should not be privileged in our explanation of British decision-making to the extent that Phillips suggests. Unlike Obama, Cameron did not face an aggressively partisan domestic environment in which his stance on issues such as these would be deployed against him. Britain's Middle East policy was underpinned by a spirit of bipartisanship and the Leader of the Opposition was in any case little interested in challenging the Coalition in this area. Syria was barely ever mentioned in Prime Minister's Questions, reflecting Miliband's determination to focus on domestic priorities.⁷³⁰ Douglas Alexander, Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, was generally supportive of the existing policy and carried out any criticism in the traditional spirit of bipartisanship that has been a regular feature of past British foreign policy.⁷³¹ Additionally, with political attention divided between multiple crises during this period, Parliament collectively spent relatively little time questioning the government on its approach to Syria in 2011.

The anecdotal evidence about Cameron's private thinking, although limited, suggests he was morally outraged by Assad's actions and desired a tougher stance toward Damascus. These feelings were instinctive, and therefore authentic. They were not responses to outside pressure. Seldon and Snowden, for example, write that the "initial crackdown incenses Cameron" but he was preoccupied with events in Libya during this period.⁷³² Furthermore, when political

⁷²⁸ Christoph Meyer, Eric Sangar and Eva Michaels., "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations Influence Media Coverage of Conflict? The Case of the Syrian Conflict, 2011-2014," *Media, War & Conflict* 11, no.1 (2018): 62-63.

⁷²⁹ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 81.

⁷³⁰ Miliband did not directly mention Syria in Parliament until June and then only to ask a vague and open-ended question about what more the UK could do to increase diplomatic pressure (HC Deb, 27/06/2011, c. 618)

⁷³¹ For Alexander's bipartisan approach in this period *see*, for example, HC Deb 28/11/2011, cc. 692-697; HC Deb, 06/02/2012, cc. 25-27.

⁷³² Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 326.

pressures suggested that the government might dampen its enthusiasm for action against Assad in the months ahead, both the Foreign Office and Number 10 continued to urge for a tougher stance. At the time of the call for Assad's departure in August 2011, domestic political pressure was certainly encouraging British policy in this direction, but it was a direction that the government was in any case inclined to pursue.

It was the government's framing of the crisis and the moral conviction underpinning its policy that best explains the call for regime change. This public declaration represented multiple things simultaneously: a statement of intent and a threat against Assad, a prediction or calculation concerning what was believed likely to happen, but also an assessment of the ethical rights and wrongs of the conflict. British policymakers were obscuring the boundary between what they assessed was likely to happen and what they believed *ought* to happen. Illustrative of this confusing position were Hague's comments to the House of Commons in November. Asked for an assessment of the staying power of the regime, the Foreign Secretary offered his judgement that the regime was "not very secure" before adding that "we *believe* the regime has lost all legitimacy... so the regime *should* understand that it has no future, that democracy *should* be introduced in Syria, and the regime *should* leave office."⁷³³ This is perhaps a more extreme example, but the government consistently presented Assad's removal as a *moral* necessity.⁷³⁴ General Richards, having been sceptical about the decision to intervene in Libya, would gradually emerge as a forthright opponent of the government's Syria policy, providing a more traditional, realist and consequentialist assessment of the crisis, in contrast to the politicians. He later recalled how, "they had this moral disgust of Assad. They didn't want to think through

⁷³³ HC Deb, 29/11/2011, c. 779, emphasis added.

⁷³⁴ See, for example, Clegg, "Speech on Arab Spring,"; Prime Minister's Office, "Press Conference in Moscow,"; HC Deb, 05/09/2011, c. 26; HC Deb, 28/11/2011, c. 688; FCO, "Foreign Secretary on Syria: 'Urgent for the Security Council to Pass a Meaningful and Strong Resolution,'" 31 January 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-on-syria-urgent-for-the-security-council-to-pass-a-meaningful-and-strong-resolution>; HC Deb, 08/02/2012, cc. 304-305.

second- and third-order questions, to find out what is really happening on the ground, where our intelligence wasn't good."⁷³⁵

It is also worth highlighting that the call for regime change was not an appeal for a simple change of personnel while maintaining the existing political structures in Syria but was a signal of support for a much wider, more ambitious and idealistic project of democratization.

Although Cameron would on occasion suggest British policy was not trying to “ferment revolution” the statement on 18 August had pledged support for “democratic transition.”⁷³⁶ In general, the rhetoric of the British government simply took for granted that whoever or whatever replaced Assad would be democratic. In autumn Britain began liaising with political opposition groups and it justified this on the basis of preparing for “democratic transition.”⁷³⁷ Just like in Libya, British policy was therefore working towards the wholesale political transformation of a country that had little or no prior experience of democratic governance, albeit on this occasion with comparatively more modest means.

The decision made by Western governments, including the US and Britain, to call for Assad's removal had important consequences for the evolution of the crisis. Calling for regime change served as an accelerant of the conflict.⁷³⁸ It hardened Russia and Iran in their suspicions of Western intentions, narrowing the possibility of the diplomatic settlement British policy was working for; it raised expectations in Turkey and the Gulf, encouraging their later efforts to militarise the conflict; and it raised expectations among opposition groups, who were now even less willing to contemplate solutions that did not automatically lead to Assad's immediate removal. Enthusiastically calling for Assad's departure was typical of an approach that was animated more by what was emotionally satisfying and symbolically appealing, rather than

⁷³⁵ Quoted in Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 327-328.

⁷³⁶ Prime Minister's Office, “UK, French and German Statement.”

⁷³⁷ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Meets Syrian Opposition,” 21 November 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-meets-syrian-opposition>; Prime Minister's Office, “Statement on the PM's Meeting with the Qatari Prime Minister,” 25 November 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-the-pms-meeting-with-the-qatari-prime-minister>; HC Deb, 10/01/2012, cc. 92-93W; HC Deb, 06/02/2012

⁷³⁸ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 82.

what best advanced practicable solutions to closing down the conflict. As a contemporary report by International Crisis Group warned, this would be a ‘‘feel good option that would change little.’’⁷³⁹ British policy was about taking a principled stand more than it was about advancing a specific objective.

Having called for regime change, Western governments moved to impose stronger sanctions on Syria. In September, the EU finally introduced an oil embargo and shifted toward comprehensive sanctions, coinciding with similar moves from the US.⁷⁴⁰ The oil embargo would certainly damage the economy and deprive the Syrian government of significant revenue, given the importance of EU markets for Syrian oil.⁷⁴¹ Subsequent sanctions packages were also targeted at individuals guilty by association and regime entities, including financial institutions.⁷⁴² The EU had therefore abandoned its traditional preference for more targeted measures, but as Collis had warned London from the outset, a policy of sanctions alone would take at least eighteen months to unseat Assad.⁷⁴³ This move therefore did little to close the gap between ends and means in British policy. In the intervening period, these measures threatened to harm the very people British policy was claiming to defend.⁷⁴⁴ Much like the regime change declaration that preceded it, the adoption of more comprehensive sanctions was driven more by a need to symbolise the government’s willingness to confront Assad and a lack of viable alternatives.⁷⁴⁵ When questioned on the value and wisdom of comprehensive sanctions, the government typically offered a description of the measures in place, rather than an explicit defence of their utility.⁷⁴⁶

⁷³⁹ ICG, *Slow-Motion Suicide*, ii and 30.

⁷⁴⁰ HC Deb, 12/09/2011, cc. 34-35WS.

⁷⁴¹ The British government estimated oil revenues constituted one quarter of all government revenue. See HC Deb, 13/10/2011, c. 496.

⁷⁴² For good analysis of EU sanctions see Peter Seeberg, ‘‘The EU and the Syria Crisis: The Use of Sanctions and the Regime’s Strategy for Survival,’’ *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 18-35.

⁷⁴³ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 78.

⁷⁴⁴ Moret, ‘‘Humanitarian Impacts.’’

⁷⁴⁵ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 86-88; ICG, *Syria’s Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report No. 128, 1 August 2012, i.

⁷⁴⁶ HC Deb, 05/07/2011; c. 1120W; HC Deb, 13/10/2011, c. 477W; FCO, ‘‘Welcomes EU Decision’’, 14 October 2011.

Stalemate in the Security Council

The intended culmination of British diplomatic pressure against Damascus was the adoption of a strong UN Security Council resolution, introducing sanctions and demonstrating the international community's resolve in confronting Assad.⁷⁴⁷ The first major effort to secure this outcome was made in October 2011. Britain and its European allies desired a Chapter VII resolution to automatically impose sanctions on Damascus. This demand was softened and the resolution that was tabled contained instead a trigger for sanctions after a thirty-day review period, in order to win the necessary support in the Council.⁷⁴⁸ The resolution was vetoed by Russia and China. Furthermore, while the resolution secured the nine necessary votes and would therefore have passed without this veto, Moscow and Beijing were not entirely alone in their opposition. The three other BRICS states abstained on the vote and put on record their criticism of Western policy, echoing many of the arguments presented by their Russian and Chinese equivalents. The debate revealed a fault-line within the international community, with the BRICS demonstrating both a different view of the conflict itself and a different assessment as to what kind of policy tools would be necessary and appropriate.⁷⁴⁹

These countries and their delegates presented a more technocratic, politically neutral and cautious view of the conflict, with a correspondingly diminished appetite for anything perceived as outside meddling. For example, during the debate on the resolution, the Indian delegate spoke of the “complexity of ground realities” and the necessity for all governments to deal with “militant groups.”⁷⁵⁰ From the vantage point of British policymakers, this was an unnecessary obfuscation of what was a more black and white situation. As Cameron explained during an interview a month before the vote, “I mean let’s be clear about what’s happening in Syria. This is a dictator who is, you know, murdering, maiming, killing his own people in huge

⁷⁴⁷ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 18 September 2012, HC 612-i, Ev. 8.

⁷⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Draft Resolution, S/2011/612, 4 October 2011.

⁷⁴⁹ UN Security Council, 6627th Meeting, S/PV.6627, 4 October 2011.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

numbers.’’⁷⁵¹ Furthermore, what was at stake on this occasion was not simply the international community’s response to the Syrian conflict, but the status of the responsibility to protect norm in the aftermath of the controversies surrounding NATO action in Libya. As Hague had recognised in a speech just weeks before the vote, ‘‘there is far from universal support among the rising powers of the 21st century for collective measures when international laws and norms are flouted in countries like Burma, or Iran or Syria.’’⁷⁵² Part of the suspicion from these states stemmed from disagreement over the way NATO had interpreted the UN mandate in Libya and Britain’s UN Ambassador Lyall Grant later conceded that this intervention made it more difficult to adopt stronger measures against Syria.⁷⁵³ The South African delegate openly spoke of how previous resolutions had been ‘‘abused’’ and worried that the resolution on the table was ‘‘part of a hidden agenda aimed at once against instituting regime change.’’⁷⁵⁴ The division at the UN cut away at Britain’s diplomatic leverage and continued to undermine the anti-Assad strategy in the months ahead.

With the Security Council paralysed, the position of the Arab League therefore took on a growing importance. Upon his return from meeting the League’s foreign ministers in October, Burt reinforced this point by calling for them to deploy their leverage with Damascus, ‘‘which may well be greater than ours.’’⁷⁵⁵ Belatedly mobilized under Qatari leadership, the League began a mediatory effort in late October.⁷⁵⁶ With Damascus failing to comply with the proposed ‘‘plan of action,’’ the League took the unprecedented step of suspending Syria and introducing sanctions in November. A revised version of the peace plan was ostensibly accepted by the Assad government on 12 December, leading to the dispatching of observers to monitor its implementation. On 22 January, Saudi Arabia declared the failure of the monitoring mission and withdrew funding, while Qatar, acting on behalf of the Arab League, proposed a new peace

⁷⁵¹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Al Jazeera Interview.’’

⁷⁵² Hague, ‘‘Best Diplomatic Service.’’

⁷⁵³ Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya*, Ev.16.

⁷⁵⁴ Security Council, 6627th Meeting, 11.

⁷⁵⁵ HC Deb, 25/10/2011, c. 164.

⁷⁵⁶ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 88-92.

plan. Qatar then referred the situation back to the Security Council on 24 January, calling for the UN to put its weight behind the new peace plan.⁷⁵⁷

The British government did act pragmatically in its determination to align with the Arab League as it had done in the build up to the Libyan intervention. Alert to Britain's limited leverage over Syria and the need to reduce the appearance of Western meddling, Burt pointed out that "it is far more powerful for the Arab League to condemn the repression in Syria, one of its own members, than for the West to do so."⁷⁵⁸ Hague was pessimistic about the prospects for success but identified the League's peace plan as the "best way forward" and pledged that Britain would use "every lever at our disposal" in support of its aims.⁷⁵⁹ Britain pressed for the League to refer the situation back to the UN, knowing that the acquisition of "regional support" would strengthen its case for strong measures.⁷⁶⁰ Qatari and Saudi actions provided the opportunity for Britain and France to make a fresh attempt at securing a UN resolution in early 2012.

With the violence in Syria worsening and the support of the Arab League secured, the government was cautiously optimistic that a second major attempt in the Security Council in February 2012 would prove more successful. However, Britain and other Western governments were forced to significantly water down and weaken the proposed text in an attempt to win enough support. The resolution that was ultimately tabled was not only much weaker than the government was hoping for, but weaker still than the resolution that had been rejected in October. This was merely a Chapter VI resolution that symbolically placed the support of the Security Council behind the efforts of the Arab League.⁷⁶¹ It explicitly ruled out military action and rather than introduce sanctions, it simply referred to the consideration of "further measures" after a review period.

⁷⁵⁷ For the Qatari role, see Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and Arab Spring*, 134-136.

⁷⁵⁸ Alistair Burt, "The Power of Western Foreign and Security Policy," 1 December 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-power-of-western-foreign-and-security-policy>

⁷⁵⁹ HC Deb, 28/11/2011, cc. 87-88.

⁷⁶⁰ HC Deb, 17/01/2011, c. 611; FCO, "Foreign Secretary Condemns Killing."

⁷⁶¹ UN Security Council, Draft Resolution S/2012/77, 4 February 2012. See also UN Security Council, 6710th Meeting, S/PV/6710, 31 January 2012; UN Security Council, 6711th Meeting, S/PV/6711, 4 February 2012.

The decision by Russia and China to exercise their vetoes again was a major blow to British policy. Although other states were willing to support the Arab League's position, Moscow and Beijing remained determined in their opposition. Divisions in the UN therefore fatally curtailed Britain's leverage in responding to the Syrian crisis and effectively brought the "escalator of pressure" to a decisive halt. This reality was glossed over or ignored in much of the government's rhetoric in the weeks and months ahead, but as Hague acknowledged in the immediate aftermath of the veto, while there would be a tightening up of the existing sanctions that were in place, "most of the sanctions that we can introduce we have already introduced."⁷⁶²

At this stage in the conflict, events in Syria were beginning to reveal some disturbing trends. By 2012, Assad's portrayal of the uprising as driven by a sectarian agenda was increasingly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and he succeeded in convincing minority groups, such as the Allawite community, that their fate was tied to the continuity of the status quo.⁷⁶³ The main political opposition grouping, the Syrian National Council (SNC), was dominated by political Islamists and failed to represent the country's minority groups, with the absence of Kurdish leaders particularly notable.⁷⁶⁴ 2012 also saw the first incidents of major terrorist bombings with the emergence of the Al Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front, in January.⁷⁶⁵ Extremist infiltration of the opposition would become an increasing problem, a development that was in part encouraged both by Qatari sponsorship of Islamist forces and funding from private donors in the Gulf region.⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶² HC Deb, 06/02/2012, c. 27.

⁷⁶³ ICG, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*.

⁷⁶⁴ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 108-113.

⁷⁶⁵ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, 10-14.

⁷⁶⁶ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State; ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso), 79-95; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 105-146; Rania, Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?" *Time*, 18 September 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/>

Different actors would interpret these developments in different ways, but for the architects of British policy, the deterioration in the violence reinforced their anti-Assad position, their good versus evil depiction of the conflict and their sympathy for the Syrian rebels. By March 2012 Cameron was speaking regularly about a “criminal” regime and referred to violence in Homs as a “scene of medieval barbarity.”⁷⁶⁷ The Syrian opposition, in contrast, continued to be presented in exclusively idealistic terms. Most of the government’s statements referred to a conflict between the Assad “regime” and the “people” of Syria. From this perspective, government policy was politically neutral and Britain was not taking sides in a civil war, it was assisting the “the people of Syria.” For example, in his criticism of Russia’s position at the UN, Hague declared that it was “a mistake to side with a brutal regime rather than *the people* of Syria.”⁷⁶⁸ On other occasions, the government referred to “protesters” or “demonstrators.”⁷⁶⁹ Rhetorical alternatives such as “opposition,” “groups” “factions” or “parties” were rarely, if ever, used in official discourse.

Furthermore, the government generally avoided describing the conflict as a civil war, resisting the efforts of Conservative backbenchers to frame the growing crisis in this way.⁷⁷⁰ As some began to question the optimism and idealism in which the government had couched its assessment of the region’s pending transformations, Hague reinforced the official view that “if we were to downgrade our expectations and allow pessimism to prevail; if we and other nations send the signal that repression and violence will be tolerated, then these immense opportunities

⁷⁶⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, “EU Council,”; HC Deb, 05/03/2012, c. 569, 573

⁷⁶⁸ HC Deb, 13/10/2011, c. 496, emphasis added.

⁷⁶⁹ For relevant examples, see FCO, “Foreign Secretary Comments on New EU Sanctions Against Syria,” 24 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-comments-on-new-eu-sanctions-against-syria>; Prime Minister’s Office, Prime Minister’s Office, “Joint UK, French and German Statement,”; FCO, “Brutal Repression in Syria,”; Prime Minister’s Office, “Al Jazeera Interview,”; Prime Minister’s Office, “PM’s Press Conference in Moscow,” 12 September 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-press-conference-in-moscow>; Cameron, “Speech To UN,”; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Condemns Killings in Syria and Says World Must Speak Up For its People,” 28 January 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-condemns-killings-in-syria-and-says-world-must-speak-up-for-its-people>

⁷⁷⁰ See, for example, HC Deb, 15/05/2012, cc. 425-426. The views of Conservative backbenchers and their impact on British policy are analysed in greater depth in the following chapter

will be squandered.’’⁷⁷¹ While this was more an argument about the wider region rather than Syria specifically, the idealistic framing of the Syrian conflict drew strength from this broader claim. Even when the government began belatedly to accept the characterisation of the conflict as a civil war, ministers still preferred to avoid such language and to stress what they saw as the democratic and secular origins of the conflict. For example, having acknowledged the growing risks of ‘‘deep sectarian violence’’ in June 2012, Hague chose to play down this dimension of the conflict, emphasising that despite the presence of this factor, ‘‘there are also many people in Syria, of different ethnicities, religions and beliefs, who want freedom and democracy in their country, and who want to be rid of their repressive regime.’’⁷⁷²

On occasion, the Prime Minister hinted at an alternative framing of the situation. Speaking before the Liaison Committee in early March 2012, Cameron argued that Britain’s main objective was ‘‘ending the bloodshed’’ and that the best route to this was Assad’s quick departure.⁷⁷³ His depiction of this approach suggested little more than a change of personnel within the existing system and in advancing this position he argued that ‘‘the idea of transition at the top is possibly a better and less bloody outcome than a revolution from the bottom.’’⁷⁷⁴ Cameron repeated a similar logic throughout March and April, suggesting that British policy was ‘‘not trying to ferment a revolution.’’⁷⁷⁵ This language, with its accompanying Burkean scepticism of revolution is perhaps suggestive of a more cautious or conservative approach, in

⁷⁷¹ William Hague, ‘‘Our Support and Dedication to the People of the Middle East Must be Consistent and Unwavering,’’ 28 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-support-and-dedication-to-the-people-of-the-middle-east-must-be-consistent-and-unwavering>. As for the example cited here, this argument was less a reaction to political developments in any one country, and more a wider narrative about the government’s faith in the Arab Spring. *See also* FCO, ‘‘Freedom is Still Flowering in the Arab Spring,’’ 13 January 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/freedom-is-still-flowering-in-the-arab-spring>; William Hague ‘‘Speech to the Lord Mayor’s Banquet,’’ 29 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet>

⁷⁷² HC Deb, 19/06/2012, c. 731.

⁷⁷³ Liaison Committee, ‘‘Oral Evidence,’’ 6 March 2012, Ev. 77.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁵ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Press Conference by David Cameron and Barack Obama,’’ 15 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/press-conference-by-david-cameron-and-barack-obama>; Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Transcript: Press Conference with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak,’’ 12 April 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-press-conference-with-malaysian-prime-minister-najib-razak>

line with the liberal conservatism Cameron claimed as the basis of his approach. However, this positioning was not consistent with the broad thrust of the government's rhetoric on Syria, the majority of which appeared to draw a line under the assumptions that had guided a previous generation of Conservative politicians.

For example, when a minority of backbenchers raised concerns about the fate of Syria's Christian community, which had traditionally enjoyed protection under the Assad regime, Hague implicitly dismissed such concerns by arguing that "we have to consider that the regime there is doomed, one way or the other. It is a question not of whether, but of how and when, it will fall."⁷⁷⁶ Arguments such as these implied any bloody consequences resulting from the collapse of the existing government were beyond the remit of Britain's moral responsibilities. Similarly, when it was pointed out that the dislodging of Assad might lead not to a stable democracy but to a more volatile situation, Hague put forward the opposing view, arguing that "I have to point out that there has been, I think, a better trend than that during the last year, which can be seen if we look at events in Libya and Tunisia and at democratic developments in Morocco and Jordan."⁷⁷⁷

The interpretive lens described above both guided and justified British policy toward Syria throughout this period, reinforcing a strong hostility toward the "regime" and person of Bashar Assad in particular. At times, it encompassed assumptions of dubious veracity, many of which were to prove mistaken as events did not bear them out. In other instances, it rendered complex ethical judgements into more simplistic dualisms. Yet this framing was not, in any final or definitive sense, right or wrong. It was, however, only one among several alternative framings of events and its presence should therefore not be taken for granted. This framing provided the ideational backdrop against which the government developed its position and while it did not inevitably correspond to a single outcome, it helped lay the ground for the public calls for Assad's departure, the adoption and escalation of various sanctions and the later moves in

⁷⁷⁶ HC Deb, 06/02/2012, cc. 28-29.

⁷⁷⁷ HC Deb, 17/01/2012, c. 613.

favour of military options which are analysed in subsequent chapters. Without the dominance of this particular view of the conflict, British policy would likely have looked very different.

One consequence of this framing was a refusal to reconsider the anti-Assad strategy that had been adopted in August 2011, despite the repeated setbacks at the UN. As was observed in the Libyan case, policymakers wanted not only to end the conflict but to end the conflict on certain terms. In advance of the vote at the UN in February, when asked by a journalist if regime change was regarded by the British government as an “absolute precondition” for resolving the crisis, Hague responded by saying “well, it’s certainly our view. It’s been our view for a long time that President Assad should go and has lost all credibility, not only internationally, but with his own people, so many of his own people as well.”⁷⁷⁸ A month after the veto, when Cameron was asked if Britain would consider dropping the demand for regime change to achieve unity within the Security Council, he avoided answering the question directly while at the same time insisting that “I cannot see a future for Syria where the people of Syria are offered any sort of life with President Assad still in charge.”⁷⁷⁹ It was the rigidity of this position and the bellicose language in which it was often presented that added to the suspicions of Russia and China that Western governments desired another Libya-style intervention. Yet even after the veto in February 2012, Britain did not backtrack from this uncompromising position. In April Hague boldly declared that:

To Bashar Al Assad we must say: you may think you can cling to power or shore up your rule through yet more murder, torture and the incarceration of your opponents. But you have forfeited all right to lead in the eyes of the world and of most Syrians. We will not turn a blind eye to what you have done to them. Until you accept a transition that reflects the will of the

⁷⁷⁸ FCO, “Foreign Secretary on Syria.”

⁷⁷⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, “Transcript: Prime Minister David Cameron and Taoiseach Enda Kenny,” 14 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-prime-minister-david-cameron-and-taoiseach-enda-kenny>

Syrian people the diplomatic and economic stranglehold will tighten. We will increase sanctions and pressure for as long as it takes.⁷⁸⁰

The Annan Plan and the Friends of Syria

Following the Security Council veto in February 2012, Kofi Annan was appointed as the joint envoy of the UN and Arab League to lead mediation efforts. The Annan plan proposed a ceasefire to be observed by a UN monitoring mission, paving the way for a “Syrian-led political process.”⁷⁸¹ The six-point proposal was primarily a means of de-escalating the conflict in lieu of a more long-term solution. Having first called for a ceasefire via a Presidential Statement, the Security Council unanimously agreed to support the plan’s proposals on 14 April, albeit without committing to any means of enforcement.⁷⁸² This was followed, a week later, with a second resolution establishing the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS).⁷⁸³ Annan’s mediatory efforts, alongside the dispatching of the supervisory mission, did at least slow the pace of further escalation during this period.⁷⁸⁴ Officially, support for the Annan plan formed the basis of British policy between the spring and summer of 2012.⁷⁸⁵

Another development following the February veto was the creation of the “Friends of Syria,” a broad diplomatic grouping bringing together those states supportive of the Arab League’s position and in favour of stronger measures from the UN.⁷⁸⁶ The British government presented

⁷⁸⁰ FCO, “Our Task is to Pressure the Regime in Damascus into Implementing Kofi Annan’s Six-Point Plan in Full and Without any Further Delay,” 1 April 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/our-task-is-to-pressure-the-regime-in-damascus-into-implementing-kofi-annan-s-six-point-plan-in-full-and-without-any-further-delay>

⁷⁸¹ UN Security Council, Resolution 2042, S/RES/2042, 14 April 2012, Annex.

⁷⁸² UN Security Council, “Statement by the President of the Security Council,” S/PRST/2012/10, 5 April 2012.

⁷⁸³ UN Security Council, Resolution 2043, S/RES/2043, 21 April 2012.

⁷⁸⁴ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 99-104.

⁷⁸⁵ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Calls for Implementation of Annan’s Six Point Plan,” 27 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-calls-for-implementation-of-annans-six-point-plan>; HC Deb, 11/06/2012, cc. 32-35.

⁷⁸⁶ FCO, “Chairman’s Conclusions of Friends of Syria meeting,” 24 February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chairmans-conclusions-of-friends-of-syria-meeting>; FCO, “We Must Show That We Will Not Abandon the Syrian People in Their Darkest Hour,” 24 February 2012,

its involvement in this group as consistent with support for the Annan plan, but it might be questioned whether this parallel diplomatic track was creating the kind of environment conducive to peace talks. The Friends welcomed into its ranks both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The former, as later described, was flooding the country with arms, while the latter appeared to be increasingly motivated by a sectarian agenda and shunned Annan from the beginning.⁷⁸⁷ From the British perspective the Friends was primarily a vehicle for furthering the anti-Assad strategy. Mirroring language he had used against Gaddafi, Cameron spoke of the purpose of this alliance as being to “co-ordinate our efforts with respect to getting rid of that dreadful regime.”⁷⁸⁸ In any case, while the size of this diplomatic grouping demonstrated the widespread and growing isolation the Assad government was facing, suggesting Russia and China were increasingly marginalised in their opposition to a stronger position from the Security Council, it did little to compensate for Britain’s lack of leverage. This was clearly displayed in the response to the “Houla massacre” in May. Referring to an “unacceptable situation,” Cameron and French President Hollande promised to “increase the pressure,”⁷⁸⁹ yet the only tangible measure that followed their bold statements was the expulsion of the Syrian charge d’affaires.⁷⁹⁰

During this period Britain began to jettison its more cautious position on the question of justice and accountability. Previously, the government had made a tactical concession by postponing any attempt to refer the situation in Syria to the ICC as such a proposal would have further undermined unity within the Security Council. However, Cameron began calling for “accountability” in the aftermath of the February veto. In Parliament, the Prime Minister agreed with the description of Assad as a “war criminal” and while he recognised that Syria

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/we-must-show-that-we-will-not-abandon-the-syrian-people-in-their-darkest-hour>

⁷⁸⁷ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 100.

⁷⁸⁸ HC Deb, 08/02/2012, c. 304.

⁷⁸⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, “Prime Minister’s Call with President Hollande Regarding Syria,” 28 May 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-ministers-call-with-president-hollande-regarding-syria>

⁷⁹⁰ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Announces Expulsion of Syrian Diplomats,” 29 May 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-announces-expulsion-of-syrian-diplomats>

was not a signatory to the ICC, he insisted that “that does not mean that we should not collect the evidence to hold these people to account for their crimes, and Britain and others are doing that work right now.”⁷⁹¹ Henceforward, “accountability” was increasingly identified as a key area of Britain’s Syria policy.⁷⁹² At the end of February, following a joint “UK-France Summit,” a communiqué was issued promising a “day of reckoning.”⁷⁹³ This commitment was reiterated at the EU Council the following month.⁷⁹⁴

This approach to the relationship between justice and peace, with its dogmatic position on what the government regarded as significant points of principle, showed continuity with the government’s Libya policy. When Cameron set out his more cautious and conservative framing of the options before the Liaison Committee in March, he would insist that Britain was calling for regime change as the best way of “ending the bloodshed.”⁷⁹⁵ Yet when one committee member suggested that this outcome might be facilitated by waiving the prospect of international justice through some form of “Idi Amin-style solution,” the Prime Minister’s ambiguous non-answer suggested that he was reluctant to compromise on the question of accountability.⁷⁹⁶ As Hague explained in relation to Britain’s wider policy on this question, international justice was “not a foreign policy tool that can be switched on or off.”⁷⁹⁷ As with the uncompromising position on regime change, these threats of accountability only heightened divisions in the Security Council and moved British policy further away from the kind of compromises necessary to secure a diplomatic breakthrough.

⁷⁹¹ HC Deb, 05/03/2012, c. 586.

⁷⁹² FCO, “Human Rights Council is Sending a Clear Message to the Assad Regime That Their Barbarity Will Not Go Unchallenged,” 1 June 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/human-rights-council-is-sending-a-clear-message-to-the-assad-regime-that-their-barbarity-will-not-go-unchallenged>; HC Deb, 11/06/2012, cc. 32-35.

⁷⁹³ FCO, “UK-France Communique: Syria,” 17 February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-communique-syria>

⁷⁹⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, “EU Council,”; HC Deb, 05/03/2012, c. 569

⁷⁹⁵ Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” 6 March 2012, Ev. 77.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Ev. 79.

⁷⁹⁷ William Hague, “International Law and Justice in a Networked World,” 9 July 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/international-law-and-justice-in-a-networked-world>

A degree of compromise between the permanent members of the Security Council appeared to have been achieved during discussions in Geneva in June. The second major initiative of Annan in his role as joint envoy was the convening of an international conference involving the major outside players. The “contact group” met in Geneva on 30 June and its outcome, the “Geneva Declaration,” represented an agreement on the principles of a political transition.⁷⁹⁸ On one level, the unanimous endorsement of the P5 was a measure of progress and Geneva I would remain the basis for future rounds of diplomacy in the months and years ahead. However, although Annan’s proposals called for a political transition, they did not prejudge the outcome to the same degree as Western governments clearly did. Even if the former Secretary General believed that Assad’s departure was necessary in the long run, which he almost certainly did, he avoided openly advertising this in public.⁷⁹⁹ The tension between Annan’s position and that of those Western governments who were ostensibly supporting his activities was clear in these negotiations. Britain joined the United States in opposing Iranian participation at Geneva, contrary to Annan’s own desires, and Hillary Clinton has made clear that she devised the communiqué’s key phrase “mutual consent” as “code for excluding Assad.”⁸⁰⁰ This meant that both the regime and opposition would have to provide consent for any arrangement and as the British government repeatedly pointed out “it is our clear understanding that this would preclude President Assad.”⁸⁰¹ The appearance of agreement at Geneva was therefore superficial and it is no surprise that in the weeks before his resignation in July, Annan criticised *both* Russia and Western governments for what he described as their “destructive competition.”⁸⁰²

As the violence increased into the summer months and the UN monitoring mission was forced to withdraw, Hague acknowledged that the Annan plan “has clearly failed so far.”⁸⁰³ In

⁷⁹⁸ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 99-104; Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 455-459.

⁷⁹⁹ Ian Black, “Kofi Annan Resigns as Syria Envoy,” *The Guardian*, 2 August 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/02/kofi-annan-resigns-syria-envoy>

⁸⁰⁰ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 456.

⁸⁰¹ HC Deb 04/07/2012, c. 57WS.

⁸⁰² Ian Black, ‘Kofi Annan Attacks Russia and West’s ‘Destructive Competition’ over Syria,’ *The Guardian*, 6 July 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/06/kofi-annan-syria-destructive-competition?INTCMP=SRCH>

⁸⁰³ FCO, ‘Foreign Secretary Calls on Syria.’

Parliament, he and other ministers came under increasing pressure to defend the existing policy and outline what measures Britain would take in the event that the plan were to fail completely.⁸⁰⁴ The Foreign Secretary raised expectations that such an eventuality would be addressed through a successful return to the Security Council or the introduction of “sweeping sanctions” by the Friends of Syria.⁸⁰⁵ The dim hope of a change in the Russian position was coupled with the standard mantra that “no options were off the table.”⁸⁰⁶ Statements and threats such as these implied an entirely artificial and disproportionate impression of Britain’s leverage and persistence with the Annan plan therefore masked the extent to which Britain was unable to influence events.

Britain tabled another UN resolution in July, which was again vetoed by Russia and China.⁸⁰⁷ On this occasion, Western governments knew in advance that a veto would be forthcoming and merely used the occasion as an opportunity for a minor propaganda victory. This outcome was always the most likely, but policymakers seemed unprepared for its implications. Even following this veto and Annan’s frustrated resignation in its aftermath, Hague and Cameron continued to speak about the necessity of supporting the Annan plan and of the Security Council coming together.⁸⁰⁸ Although British policy did not immediately adjust to the impact of the continued divisions at the UN and Annan’s departure from the scene, the third veto was to prove a watershed in the development of Britain’s response to the crisis and it ultimately led to the pursuit of a more unilateral, high-risk and military solution. This is the subject of the following chapter.

⁸⁰⁴ HC Deb, 11/06/2012, cc. 32-48; HC Deb, 19/06/2012, cc. 730-73; HC Deb, 25/06/2012, cc. 33-36.

⁸⁰⁵ HC Deb, 11/06/2012, c. 34

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid, cc. 32-34; FCO, “Foreign Secretary: ‘International Unity’ Needed on Syria,” 10 June 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-international-unity-needed-on-syria>; Hague, “International Law and Justice.”

⁸⁰⁷ UN Security Council, Draft Resolution, S/2012/538, 19 July 2012; UN Security Council, 6810th Meeting, S/PV.6810, 19 July 2012. *See also* UN Security Council, Draft Resolution S/2012/547/Rev.2, 19 July 2012.

⁸⁰⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, “Transcript: PM and Karzai Press Conference,” 20 July 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-pm-and-karzai-press-conference-20-july-2012>; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Commends Efforts of Joint Special Envoy on Syria,” 2 August 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-commends-efforts-of-joint-special-envoy-on-syria>

Throughout the development of the conflict, and particularly during the period reviewed above, British policy was therefore limited by the international environment, particularly the divisions within the UN Security Council, which cut away at British leverage and made it difficult to adopt a stronger response. The presence of these constraining factors make it difficult to tell what Britain wanted to do. In an interview on Sky News in June 2011, Hague described the prospect of resolution like UNSC 1973 as “so hypothetical as to be academic” and this remained the case throughout the conflict.⁸⁰⁹ It cannot be argued that British policymakers would have automatically favoured a military solution, if only the diplomatic environment had been sufficiently permissive. Yet what is undoubtedly true is that throughout this period and beyond, both Cameron and Hague favoured an approach that was bolder and stronger than other states were willing to support and were frustrated with the divisions within the international community. This was true from the very beginning of the crisis. Cameron was persistent in his claim that “we need to go further.”⁸¹⁰

From the perspective of the British government, the main difference between Libya and Syria was not to be found in the conflict itself but in the international environment. This can be inferred from the government’s framing of the Syrian uprising, but it was made explicit when ministers responded to questions about the differences between the two cases. As observed, the government emphasised the divisions in the international community as the most significant difference with the Libyan case, where the Arab League had quickly adopted a strong position and there was a higher level of unity at the UN. However, it would have been entirely reasonable to have argued that while the loss of life in Syria was tragic, civilians were not yet threatened to the same degree as had been obvious in Libya, particularly during the first year of the crisis. No member of the British government ever dared to suggest such a view, nor did they point to the myriad other differences between the two cases. Such positioning not only made clear the fact that Britain favoured a much tougher stance vis-à-vis Damascus than other members of the international community were willing to support, it also tended to suggest that

⁸⁰⁹ FCO, “Situation in Syria Very Serious.”

⁸¹⁰ HC Deb, 27/06/2011, c. 619.

the government was sympathetic to the idea of military intervention, *at least in principle*. When Hague confronted questions about the selective application of humanitarian intervention in response to the Arab Spring, he argued that Britain could not intervene in every case even where the moral arguments for doing so were strong, claiming that “we may feel the same impulsion and moral imperative to do so, but we may be constrained by other factors.”⁸¹¹ It was obvious which “other factors” he was referring to.

Furthermore, ministers were persistent in pointing out that no options were being ruled out for the future, even while playing down the immediate prospects of military action. The diplomacy-first approach was based on an implicit threat that military intervention or arming the rebels were future possibilities. As Hague explained, “we do not want to see the Annan plan fail, but if, despite our best efforts, it does not succeed, we would have to consider other options for resolving the crisis and, in our view, all options should then be on the table.”⁸¹² This might have been a way of stalling the consideration of difficult questions, but it was not simply a bluff. As the following chapter will show, Hague and Cameron went to great lengths to revise the British position on arming Assad’s opponents toward the end of 2012.

Military Alternatives?

An assessment of the key drivers of British policy must also reckon with the possibility of various alternative approaches. The Chief of Defence Staff developed what he regarded as a superior alternative in late 2011. “Extract, Equip and Train” represented General Richards’ efforts to match the government’s insistence on ending the conflict through regime change with the appropriate means. In short, the plan would have involved training and arming a Syrian rebel army in neighbouring countries, over a period of twelve months, before inserting it into the conflict with the support of Western naval and air power.⁸¹³ The extent to which such ideas were debated at the highest levels is unclear. Although Cameron was later made aware of these

⁸¹¹ FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 7 September 2011, Ev. 8-9.

⁸¹² HC Deb, 11/06/2012, c. 33.

⁸¹³ For details of the plan see Richards, *Taking Command*, 321-322; Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 279-280; Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 327-328.

proposals, they were reportedly rejected by Hugh Powell, a senior advisor to the NSC, on the grounds that they were “unsellable in Washington” and “more than the market could bear.”⁸¹⁴ The general has since suggested the politicians failed to take up his plan because of a lack of courage,⁸¹⁵ while Goodman has asserted that its rejection is evidence of poor leadership on Cameron’s part.⁸¹⁶

Such criticisms do not take account of two incontrovertible drawbacks to the Richards’ plan. Firstly, the implementation of this strategy would have entailed casting international opinion and international law to one side. Given the diplomatic backlash following the Libyan intervention – an intervention in which Western support for its proxies was modest, covert and often via indirect means – to have repeated a similar operation here without Security Council approval would not simply have incensed the Russians and Chinese but would have inflamed international opinion in much the same way that the 2003 Iraq invasion had done. The suggestion that a “Right to Protect Doctrine” would have provided a legal basis for such action in the absence of UN approval was also surely misplaced.⁸¹⁷ From a purely military perspective, the strategy might have appeared a suitable and appropriate response, but the military man seemed not to appreciate the legal and diplomatic implications of what he was proposing.

Secondly, despite its author, this was primarily a plan for US action, with Britain and others playing the usual supportive role. When General Martin Dempsey outlined the demands of enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria in early 2012, he informed the White House that such an operation would require 70,000 servicemen and significantly more than the \$1.6 billion that had been required for the Libyan operation.⁸¹⁸ While such figures may have been inflated, they serve to highlight the magnitude of resources Richards was demanding. His plan called for a no-

⁸¹⁴ Quoted in Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 327.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid.

⁸¹⁶ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 280.

⁸¹⁷ Assuming Richards’ was referring to “responsibility to protect,” it should be noted that the version of the norm that was accepted by the international community did not dispense with the necessity of Security Council authorization. See UN General Assembly, *2005 World Summit Outcome*, A/60/L.1, 15 September 2005, paragraphs 138-139.

⁸¹⁸ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 170.

fly zone *in addition* to the active use of air and naval assets in conjunction with a rebel army of 100,000 men, all of whom would have to be trained and armed by Western governments. There were some within the US administration who were sympathetic to the idea of providing much greater support to the opposition, but when Secretary Clinton and General Petraeus presented more detailed plans to Obama in the summer of 2012, the President decided against such an approach.⁸¹⁹ Ultimately, the viability of the Richards' plan depended not on the courage of British politicians, but on the will of Barack Obama.

This observation leads into a wider acknowledgement about the importance of the US position. The scale of resources demanded by Richards certainly exceeded the limits of Britain's military capabilities. Yet so too did more modest proposals for "safe havens" and "no fly zones." Following the second UN veto in February 2012, some more hawkish Labour members of Parliament began agitating in favour of such measures,⁸²⁰ but as military chiefs had warned Cameron in the summer of 2011, "Syria is not Libya."⁸²¹ For one, Assad could rely on vastly superior anti-aircraft defences. The implications of such facts were not publicly conceded by the British government until much later in 2012, following the third Russian veto at the UN. In his first statement to the House following this development, Hague responded to the suggestion that Britain impose a no-fly zone without US support by admitting that "such an option would only be practicable with the full support of the United States of America".⁸²² He reiterated the same facts in his testimony to the FAC two weeks later and spelled out the reality even more starkly in April 2013, observing that "the decision [to impose a no-fly zone] would essentially be one for the United States, given the scale required. No such decision by the United States has been taken. We are working in an environment where we do not have a no-fly zone and we have to consider the options available to us in light of that."⁸²³

⁸¹⁹ For the details of this see Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 460-464; Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 16; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 143-145.

⁸²⁰ HC Deb, 06/02/2012, cc. 23-43.

⁸²¹ Quoted in Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 170.

⁸²² HC Deb 03/09/2012, c. 60.

⁸²³ FAC, "Oral Evidence," 18 September 2012, Ev. 11; HC Deb, 15/04/2013, c. 44.

On one rare occasion, the Foreign Secretary also acknowledged that the consequences of intervening in Syria would be “far more difficult to foresee” than had been the case in Libya.⁸²⁴ This was slightly different from pointing to the diplomatic constraints or the necessity of US support. There are always practical considerations relating to different types of military action. For example, Hague could allude to past experiences in warning against the limitations of safe areas that were inadequately protected.⁸²⁵ Similarly, enforcing an arms embargo against Assad would be futile without cooperation from neighbouring countries.⁸²⁶ Yet all these arguments were merely academic given the realities of the diplomatic environment and Britain’s reliance on the military might of the US. British policy should not therefore be assessed in the presence of background assumptions that over-estimate the options available to decision-makers.

Direct intervention was practically impossible, but intervention via proxy was merely difficult and risky. The government began a gradual process of engagement with opposition groups in late September 2011, but this approach was exclusively limited to supporting political opposition groups.⁸²⁷ Britain ruled out even liaising with groups like the Free Syrian Army which, in Hague’s words, was “engaged in a different kind of struggle.”⁸²⁸ Those groups and individuals that the British government was disposed toward viewing as viable successors to Assad were largely based in exile, controlled no territory within Syria and had little ability to directly shape events on the ground. While not ruling out options for the future, ministers had consistently opposed the idea of providing military support to the opposition. Even following

⁸²⁴ HC Deb, 17/01/2012, c. 612.

⁸²⁵ HC Deb, 06/02/2012, c. 32; HC Deb, 28/02/2012, c. 137; HC Deb, 11/06/2012, c. 39

⁸²⁶ HC Deb, 17/04/2012, c. 160.

⁸²⁷ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Meets Syrian Activists,” 30 September 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-meets-syrian-activists>; FCO, “Foreign Office Minister Meets Syrian National Council Members,” 12 October 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-office-minister-meets-syrian-national-council-members>; HC Deb, 13/10/2011, c. 496; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Meets,”; HC Deb, 10/01/2012, cc. 92-93W; FCO, “Foreign Secretary: ‘We Have to Intensify the Pressure’ on Syria,” 24 February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-we-have-to-intensify-the-pressure-on-syria--2>

⁸²⁸ HC Deb, 06/02/2012, c. 31.

the emphatic demonstration of the limits of the diplomatic route in February, Hague made clear that “we are not contemplating arming anybody.”⁸²⁹

The reticence toward arming the rebels was to a significant extent founded on a pragmatic recognition of the dangers and limitations of this option. There was the risk that any such arms would fall into the hands of dangerous extremists or that arming one side would escalate the conflict. Even as the prospect of a diplomatic solution receded into the summer months, Hague pointed out that “it is difficult to know in the current situation what those arms would be used for, and whether they could also be used to commit atrocities that we would find appalling. They could contribute to the cycle of violence that is building up and create a further reaction on the other side.”⁸³⁰ Instead, the government gradually increased its level of engagement with the political opposition, lobbied them to adopt a more unified position and continued to provide relatively small-scale “practical assistance” in areas such as training for human rights activists and citizen journalists. Hague announced £500,000 in funding for the opposition in March 2012, in addition to the £450,000 Britain had already provided since August 2011.⁸³¹

The divisions within the opposition and the lack of intelligence about those groups carrying out the fighting compounded the risks referred to above. As Cameron informed the Liaison Committee in March, “it would be welcome if there was a clear establishment of who the Syrian opposition are and a clearer sense that they are genuinely representative of a future for Syria that would be democratic, open, tolerant of minorities, and all the rest.”⁸³² Further engagement with opposition groups served to reveal a highly divided movement. Behind the scenes, the Foreign Office continued to caution against providing arms to Assad’s opponents throughout 2012.⁸³³ Publicly, the divisions within the opposition, and the fact that the Syrian

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ HC Deb, 11/06/2012, c. 40.

⁸³¹ FCO, “Foreign Secretary to Announce Support for Syrian Political Opposition,” 29 March 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-to-announce-support-for-syrian-political-opposition>; See also Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” 6 March 2012, Ev. 76-77 and FAC, “Oral Evidence,” 8 March 2012, Ev. 14-15 for more detail on the level and extent of UK support at this stage.

⁸³² Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” Ev. 77.

⁸³³ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 279.

National Council controlled no territory on the ground began to be acknowledged as another major difference with the Libyan case and an argument that justified a different approach.⁸³⁴

The diplomatic and legal obstacles were also greater than most advocates of arming the rebels were willing to acknowledge. Such a move would have first required lifting the EU's arms embargo, and any attempt would have been strongly opposed by the majority of member states.⁸³⁵ The situation was further complicated by the fact that the embargo itself was part of the broader package of sanctions. Most importantly, if arming the opposition was consistent with the escalatory logic built into existing policy, it also represented a radical break with the effort to build and maintain a broad coalition to isolate Damascus. There would be zero possibility of any agreement at the Security Council if one of its permanent members began openly arming one faction in a civil war. It would have amounted to publicly signalling that British policy favoured working against the mediation efforts of UN envoy Kofi Annan.

Finally, the persistence with the diplomatic track was also encouraged by a faulty assessment of Russian motivations. Believing that Russia's position on Syria was motivated by nothing other than a traditional view of its national interests, British policy assumed that a further deterioration would be more likely to lead to a change of approach in Moscow, rather than a hardening of the existing position. Speaking before the FAC in March 2012, Hague therefore explained that "this depends, of course, on one's analysis of what will happen ultimately, but if our view is correct... it is actually in the national interests of Russia and China to support a political transition at some stage."⁸³⁶ At almost every stage, the British government failed to detect any shift in Moscow's position, but as Burt recalls "as long as we had the Russians saying, 'yeah, we'll think about it,' we kept hoping they would shift their view."⁸³⁷ This excessively optimistic calculation therefore helped keep alive a strategy that otherwise had

⁸³⁴ HC Deb, 28/11/2011, c. 688; Prime Minister's Office, "UK-France Summit Press Conference," 17 February 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-france-summit-press-conference>

⁸³⁵ Liaison Committee, 'Oral Evidence,' 6 March 2012, Ev. 76-77.

⁸³⁶ FAC, "Oral Evidence," HC-1879-i, 8 March 2012, Ev. 15. For similar arguments *see also* Prime Minister's Office, "Press Conference with Barack Obama,"; FCO, "Time Running Out,"; HC Deb, 11/06/2012, cc. 33, 39-40.

⁸³⁷ Quoted in Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 94.

clearly reached a dead-end and appeared to reflect the assumption that while British policy was driven by a sense of altruism and responsibility, Russia motives were more likely self-interested. In fact, Moscow's motivations were more complicated and the disagreement within the Security Council reflected a genuine ideological divergence just as much as a clash of competing interests.⁸³⁸

If this area of British policy shows a certain level of restraint, caution and pragmatism it should also be observed that Britain adopted a *laissez-faire* approach toward its regional partners, who were increasingly willing to pour arms into the conflict. Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia played their part in the growing internationalisation of the conflict, with Doha occupying the predominant role in arming and financing the opposition beginning in 2012.⁸³⁹ Opposition groups of an Islamist persuasion also benefited from financial flows from private donors in the Gulf region. It is difficult to establish whether Britain passively accepted this or actively encouraged it but ministers avoided any public criticism of this development, choosing instead to praise the "constructive" role of their allies."⁸⁴⁰ It might be supposed that the government effectively acquiesced to this to maintain as broad as possible an alliance against Assad. In her memoirs, Clinton treats this development almost as if it were a *fait accompli*, but she writes that while the US was not willing to provide arms, "we also didn't want to splinter the anti-Assad coalition or lose leverage with the Arab countries."⁸⁴¹ There is also some evidence suggesting Western intelligence agencies, including MI6, played a role in facilitating arms supplies for the purpose of monitoring what was often a chaotic and disorderly operation.⁸⁴² An obvious

⁸³⁸ On Russian policy see Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 795-823; Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention," *Survival* 55, no. 1 (2013): 35-41.

⁸³⁹ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 134-142; Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels." For Qatar more specifically, see Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and Arab Spring*, 131-144; Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution," *Financial Times*, 17 May 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de>

⁸⁴⁰ HC Deb, 19/03/2012, c. 486W.

⁸⁴¹ Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 453.

⁸⁴² Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 143-144.

consequence of all of this was an increase in the factionalism that greater engagement with the opposition was attempting to overcome.

Conclusions

In an interview with Rowan Williams in June 2011, the Foreign Secretary set out his philosophy that Britain must “temper idealism with pragmatism.”⁸⁴³ There were clearly pragmatic elements to British policy, both in style and substance. There were calculated concessions to the need for diplomatic unity and the recognition of Britain’s lack of leverage during the early stages of the crisis, there was the occasional presentation of British policy in the traditional language of “pragmatism” familiar to previous Conservative foreign secretaries, and there was a clear and consistent preference for regional ownership. Above all, there was a cautious attitude toward arming the opposition and a willingness to pursue diplomatic, i.e. non-military options, until the point at which they had been exhausted. This might suggest affinities with the conservative pragmatic approach described in Chapter Two or, at the very least, it might be concluded that Britain’s Syria policy had a closer proximity to traditional liberal internationalism than the more hawkish variants of liberalism that have gained notoriety in the post-Cold War period.

This chapter has cautioned against such conclusions. If British policy had elements of pragmatism or realism, then these more often existed at the tactical level. Britain’s broader strategy for Syria was driven first and foremost by a firm sense of moral conviction and less by a calculated assessment of British interests or a judicious evaluation of what was practicable. It is true that the diplomatic approach was often based on a more realistic assessment of Britain’s lack of leverage, but British objectives in Syria were almost identical to those in Libya. In both cases, the government pursued a policy of democratic regime change. The very fact that the government pursued this agenda in Syria without deploying military capabilities could just as

⁸⁴³ FCO, “Britain Abroad Must Temper Idealism with Pragmatism”, 17 June 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/britain-abroad-must-temper-idealism-with-pragmatism>

easily be interpreted as evidence of even greater idealism. The gap between ends and means made this a decidedly un-pragmatic and unrealistic policy.

Furthermore, to the extent that elements of pragmatism were incorporated into British policy, the overall result was not an equidistant middle ground between the twin poles of idealism and realism, as the doctrine of liberal conservatism liked to suggest. Britain's approach to the Syrian conflict was much more the product of the idealism of its architects than it might initially appear. The government framed the Syrian crisis as the final battleground of the Arab Spring, a battle between a "criminal" regime and a secular and democratic opposition. It publicly called for Assad to be removed from power and imposed strong sanctions against Syria, less because this was calculated to advance a specific objective, but more because it demonstrated that Britain was taking a principled stand against Assad's repression. And it continued to insist on regime change and accountability to the detriment of unity in the Security Council and the prospects of Annan's mediation efforts. While policymakers were sometimes accused of inconsistency for not intervening in Syria, the closer one looks the greater are the similarities with the Libyan case.

What prevented the British government from not using force against Assad as it had done against Gaddafi was not so much a lack of leadership, an indifference toward suffering Syrians or a more conservative mindset. The primary reason the British government did not seriously consider deploying force was because the diplomatic constraints rendered debates about intervention largely academic. If these constraints had to be mediated through the perceptions of key decision-makers, they were sufficiently tangible that no amount of discursive or psychological gymnastics could wish them away. The Syrian conflict would demonstrate that, without the uniquely permissive diplomatic environment that greeted the self-styled protectors of Benghazi in March 2011, the geopolitical terrain of the contemporary Middle East is inhospitable to Britain's "punching above our weight." This is a reality that any British government, interventionist or not, would have to reckon with. Additionally, even if one were to dismiss the significance of such constraints, a minority coalition of the willing could not

intervene without US support. Decisions about intervention were therefore the preserve of Washington, a fact that was somehow lost on British lobbyists for the interventionist cause. While much of the research in this thesis has focused on the beliefs and attitudes of individuals within the government, this chapter has sought to give equal weight to those structural factors which, on this occasion, had a decisive impact in shaping the outcome.

Chapter Six: Syria: Arming the Rebels?

The previous chapter showed how diplomatic and practical constraints contained the interventionist impulses of the Coalition government in its desire to remove Bashar Assad from power in Syria. The diplomatic impasse at the UN led to a reappraisal of the existing approach in late 2012. This chapter details how this reappraisal led not a sober acceptance of the limits of British leverage, nor a retreat from a maximalist diplomatic position, but instead a more radical shift in favour of intervention via proxy. Beginning in late 2012, Britain stepped up the scale and nature of its support for the opposition and began preparing the ground for the provision of lethal military support. The momentum toward arming the opposition halted in July of 2013 in the context of growing opposition to the direction of British policy in Parliament, divisions within government and warnings from the military that the conflict was now too far advanced for British arms to make a difference.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to assess the strength of the government's growing enthusiasm for arming Assad's opponents, the motives behind this shift in policy and the reasons for its abandonment. The interpretation developed conceives of Cameron and Hague's stalled attempt to arm the opposition as a form of liberal intervention, shaped by a continued sense of moral outrage with Assad, an abstract set of principles about the duties and obligations of the British state in such circumstances, and the need to symbolise this with some form of tangible action. This chapter further argues that the effort to arm the Syrian rebels was abandoned, less because of the practical objections raised by senior military advisers as was reported at the time, but more because of domestic political constraints. This chapter shows how, in a lesser known instance of parliamentary activism, the House of Commons exercised a *de facto* veto over British Syria policy in July 2013, a mere six weeks before the more emphatic vote against military action in August.

The first part of this chapter traces the development of the government's relationship with the Syrian opposition and its position on the EU arms embargo. It shows, firstly, how the nature of Britain's engagement with the Syrian opposition changed and secondly, how Britain was the driving force behind efforts to amend and lift the EU's arms embargo from late 2012 onwards. Despite ultimately succeeding in its ambition to lift the embargo, the government continued to insist that no decisions had been taken regarding whether to send military support to the rebels. This section argues that such claims were at best disingenuous and that from spring of 2013 at the latest, both Cameron and Hague favoured arming the rebels even if they had yet to make any formal decisions to this effect.

The second section is the core of the chapter and it analyses the rationale and motivations behind the apparent enthusiasm for this intervention. This section outlines an interpretation that situates the growing move toward arming the opposition within some of the themes and ideas developed in previous chapters, showing how this interventionist streak is consistent with an idealistic framing of the conflict, an abstract set of prescriptions related to the question of intervention and an approach that prioritises an intuitive sense of right and wrong over more practical considerations. Furthermore, analogies with the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s, while less important than in the build up to the Libyan intervention, were a key feature of the Prime Minister's thinking during this period and displaced the more cautionary tales that others had drawn from the experience of Iraq in the 2000s.

The final briefer section examines why, having gone to such lengths to prepare the legal ground for arming the opposition, the government held back from exercising this option. The analysis in this section supports the conclusion that while there were many factors that discouraged the government from taking this step, it was the weight of domestic political opposition in Parliament that was most important in accounting for the backtracking. Not only was the scale of opposition in the Commons clear and overwhelming, it also acquired a formal edge. This section reveals how a backbench rebellion forced Cameron and Hague to reluctantly concede

Parliament's right to vote ahead of any decision to supply arms, a concession that effectively paralysed the government's ability to act.

The evidence this chapter draws upon is largely taken from parliamentary debates and myriad official announcements made by the government during this period, including press releases, speeches and transcripts of media appearances. This chapter also draws upon the rolling inquiries of the FAC and the Liaison Committee. This provides a larger base of evidence than was available for the previous chapter. As the Syrian conflict rose up the international agenda in 2013, and as the potential for British involvement became increasingly apparent, there was more detailed scrutiny of government policy. At the same time, using these sources to infer the motives behind policy is less straight forward, as the government's rhetorical positioning had to take into consideration growing opposition to its policy both domestically and internationally.

Lifting the Embargo

In the weeks and months following the veto in July, Britain increased the level and nature of its engagement with the opposition. In August, following a pledge of a further £500,000 in practical assistance to the political opposition, Hague announced a commitment, "in principle," to provide non-lethal assistance in the form of communications equipment and body armour.⁸⁴⁴ By the end of the year, Britain had provided approximately £7 million of "practical" support to the opposition.⁸⁴⁵ The key focus of this effort was in assisting the opposition in providing basic services in areas under its control. Additionally, the agenda of "political transition" received greater focus and attention during this period and Hague made clear that continued increases in

⁸⁴⁴ FCO, "Foreign Secretary Statement on Syria," 10 August 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-syria>

⁸⁴⁵ HC Deb, 10/01/13, c. 483.

British assistance were conditional on the development of “detailed plans” for a post-Assad Syria.⁸⁴⁶

Coinciding with these changes were wider efforts to reorganize the ineffectual political opposition. Much of this activity was conducted through the “core group” of the Friends of Syria, a smaller grouping of eleven states, established at British initiative.⁸⁴⁷ The efforts of outside actors to shape the opposition, encouraged by Western governments but led by Turkey and the Gulf states, culminated in the creation of the National Coalition in November.⁸⁴⁸ Most independent analysts have concluded that the coalition continued to be beset by factionalism and the rival actions of its foreign sponsors, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but the British government immediately celebrated its formation as a major breakthrough.⁸⁴⁹

Britain therefore quickly followed France, Turkey and the Gulf states in offering diplomatic recognition to the National Coalition.⁸⁵⁰ If opposition disunity was previously pointed to as a constraint on possible action, the Coalition was celebrated as having resolved this problem, with Hague telling Parliament that “a credible alternative to the Assad regime is emerging that has the growing support of the Arab League, the European Union, the United States and an increasing number of other countries.”⁸⁵¹ In fact, the US initially held back from taking this step, reflecting concerns that the coalition had not overcome the problems that undermined its

⁸⁴⁶ FCO, “Foreign Secretary’s Remarks at Friends of Syria Meeting,” 12 December 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-remarks-at-the-friends-of-syria-meeting>. See also HC Deb, 03/09/12, cc. 53-56; HC Deb, 18/10/12, cc. 33-35WS.

⁸⁴⁷ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 114; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Statement on Importance of Isolating the Assad Regime and Ending Impunity,” 28 September 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-importance-of-isolating-the-assad-regime-and-ending-impunity>

⁸⁴⁸ On this development, see Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 114-117.

⁸⁴⁹ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Welcomes Doha Agreement on Syrian Opposition,” 11 November 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-welcomes-doha-agreement-on-syrian-opposition>

⁸⁵⁰ HC Deb, 20/11/12, c. 445.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*, c. 446.

predecessor.⁸⁵² Britain and France hoped to persuade the European Union to offer diplomatic recognition at the following Foreign Affairs Council, but their efforts proved unsuccessful.⁸⁵³

In addition to these graduated increases in support for the political opposition, this period also saw Britain establishing links with the Free Syrian Army for the first time. Having previously focused on engaging with the political opposition exclusively, Hague announced in September that he had instructed officials to begin liaising with the *political* leadership of the FSA outside of Syria.⁸⁵⁴ A month later, it was announced that contacts would now be extended to the group's *military* leadership.⁸⁵⁵ This was a significant change in policy, as Britain was now liaising with armed groups involved in the fighting on the ground for the first time. While the modest scale of British support for the opposition should not be overstated, there was therefore a qualitative and quantitative change in this area in the months following the collapse of the Annan plan. The NSC also held a series of important meetings in November, during which the full range of policy options were discussed.⁸⁵⁶ We cannot know the details of these discussions, but Seldon and Snowdon have cited them as the basis of a change of approach.⁸⁵⁷ According to their account, the Prime Minister expressed his growing frustration with the rising death toll and at an NSC meeting on 14 November he made clear he wanted “movement” on Syria.⁸⁵⁸ The subsequent trajectory of British policy, which from December onwards purposively set about altering and then removing the EU's arms embargo, is consistent with this interpretation.

The first public indications that Britain was considering revisiting the question of arming the opposition were in December. British diplomats quietly modified the renewal period for the sanctions package, introducing quarterly reviews, before announcing the government would be making “fresh arguments” in favour of amending the embargo before the renewal deadline in

⁸⁵² Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 116.

⁸⁵³ HC Deb, 18/12/2012, c. 90-91WS.

⁸⁵⁴ HC Deb, 03/09/12, c. 54.

⁸⁵⁵ HC Deb, 07/11/12, c. 40-42WS.

⁸⁵⁶ FCO, “International Meeting.”

⁸⁵⁷ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 327-328.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 328.

March.⁸⁵⁹ During the European Council meeting on 13-14 December, member states, under pressure from London and Paris, mandated the Foreign Affairs Council to “work on all options to support and help the opposition and to enable greater support for the protection of civilians.”⁸⁶⁰

The language used by the British Prime Minister was far more forceful. In the press conference following the adoption of these Conclusions, Cameron sought to build momentum in favour of a more interventionist approach, declaring that, “I want a very clear message to go to President Assad that nothing is off the table. That further support, further work, further help with the Opposition who are now better formed, better organised, better coordinated, is robustly on the table.”⁸⁶¹ While it was not explicit what options were being considered, the emphasis on Britain’s “good relations with the opposition,” when coupled with the threat against Assad, clearly hinted toward the possibility of providing arms.⁸⁶² When Miliband subsequently questioned whether Cameron was considering lifting the embargo altogether, as opposed to merely amending it to allow for greater practical assistance, Cameron responded by pointing out that “we will be keeping the arms embargo on the regime,” a response which clearly implied anything else was open to revision.⁸⁶³

From this point onwards, the official position of the British government on the question of the arms embargo was the prisoner of deliberate obfuscation. The clearest statement of this position was provided by Alistair Burt, during a Backbencher Debate on EU sanctions on 21 May 2013:

I want to make this Government’s position clear: no decision on arming the Syrian opposition has been taken. Amending the embargo on opposition forces would not mean that we would

⁸⁵⁹ HC Deb, 06/12/12, c. 77WS. On the changing of the renewal period, *see* Joshua Chaffin, “EU Shortens Arms Embargo Against Syria,” FT.com, 28 November 2012; HC Deb, 04/12/12, c. 709.

⁸⁶⁰ European Council, “European Council Conclusions,” 13-14 December 2012, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_DOC-12-11_en.htm

⁸⁶¹ Prime Minister’s Office, “Transcript of European Council Press Conference,” 15 December 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/transcript-of-european-council-press-conference>

⁸⁶² *Ibid.*

⁸⁶³ HC Deb, 17/12/12, c. 566-568.

automatically and immediately begin arming them, although we cannot rule that out in the future; but even without acting on it, providing an exemption from the current arms embargo for opposition forces would send a powerful and timely signal to both sides.⁸⁶⁴

This was arguably the British position from as early as January 2013. On 14 January, long before there was any explicit talk of lifting the embargo in public, a junior defence minister stated in Parliament that, “the United Kingdom would like greater flexibility in the embargo on Syria, so that at some point in the future, possibly, we can supply the opposition groups that we are comfortable with the means to deal with the situation; but there are no plans to do so at the moment and we will keep the situation under review.”⁸⁶⁵

In most instances, Cameron and Hague preferred to couch their position in far more inscrutable language. It was simply easier to make vague arguments about “amending” the embargo, or providing “technical assistance,” than it was to talk openly about lifting it; it was more expedient to cite the need for “flexibility” in response to a changing situation than it was to explicitly favour a controversial intervention. Above all, it was certainly convenient to repeatedly claim that the government had made “no decisions” about whether or not to send arms to Assad’s opponents.⁸⁶⁶ Between December of 2012 and June of 2013, Britain therefore removed all of the legal obstacles in the path of arming the opposition and ministers repeatedly made abstract arguments about the potential benefits or necessities of taking this approach, all the while avoiding explicitly committing themselves to an outcome that, to contemporary observers, appeared increasingly inevitable by spring of 2013.

Part of the reason for this orchestrated equivocation was that even amending the embargo to permit the provision of “non-lethal” military assistance presented a diplomatic challenge.

⁸⁶⁴ HC Deb, 21/05/2013, c. 1183.

⁸⁶⁵ HC Deb, 14/01/13, c. 589.

⁸⁶⁶ HC Deb, 19/03/13, cc. 797-809; HC Deb, 20/05/13, c. 905; HC Deb, 21/05/13, cc. 1175-1199

Aside from France and Italy, most member states were opposed to changing the status quo. Opposition to British policy at the February Foreign Affairs Council was led by Germany, Sweden and EU Foreign Policy chief, Baroness Ashton.⁸⁶⁷ Britain's determination to secure amendments was clear from the willingness to allow the entire sanctions package to collapse if EU states were not willing to assent to changes, with UK officials having quickly drawn up legislation to prepare for such contingencies.⁸⁶⁸ Member states reached a compromise solution, allowing the UK and France to provide "non-lethal" military assistance to the opposition under a specific exemption and for the purpose of "protecting civilians," while maintaining the embargo in place.⁸⁶⁹ Some contemporary press reporting hinted that the British intention had been to lift the embargo in full.⁸⁷⁰ Hague's denials were undermined by his pointedly describing the outcome as a "compromise," a description which left unanswered the question as to what further amendments could be sought without effectively lifting the embargo entirely.

Regardless of whether Britain was already seeking to lift the embargo, or whether the government was only looking to alter its terms, the amendments paved the way for increases in assistance to the rebels. On 6 March, Hague announced that the UK would provide £3 million in practical support for the coming month, and a further £10 million thereafter.⁸⁷¹ The total UK contribution, it was claimed, would therefore run to \$20 million, on top of the \$60 million in aid that US Secretary of State John Kerry had pledged at the last Friends of Syria meeting in Rome

⁸⁶⁷ Bruno Waterfield and Richard Spencer, "EU Battle Over Move To Ease Arms Flow for Syrian Rebels," *The Telegraph*, 15 February 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9873952/EU-battle-over-move-to-ease-arms-flow-for-Syrian-rebels.html>; Bruno Waterfield and Ruth Sherlock, "Britain Could Ramp up Scale of Security to Syria Rebels," *The Telegraph*, 18 February 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9878144/Britain-could-ramp-up-scale-of-security-to-Syria-rebels.html>

⁸⁶⁸ Liaison Committee, "Oral Evidence," HC 484-iv, 12 March 2013, Ev. 45-46.

⁸⁶⁹ Council of the European Union, 3332 Council Meeting, Foreign Affairs, 18 February 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-13-55_en.htm; HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 963.

⁸⁷⁰ Bruno Waterfield, "Britain May Step Up Aid for Syrian Rebels," *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2013.

⁸⁷¹ HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 963.

at the end of February.⁸⁷² The UK had provided a total of £9.4 million in practical assistance up until this stage, so such a shift represented a significant increase in relative terms. Furthermore, the amendments now permitted the UK to provide non-lethal military equipment, including body armour and armoured jeeps, as well as training in providing security in areas under opposition control. Hague subsequently informed the House of the details of a “gift” to the Syrian opposition, which included, among other things, 25 trucks and 20 sets of body armour.⁸⁷³

More significantly, the adoption of these amendments was immediately followed by efforts to build diplomatic and political momentum in favour of further changes. Having declared the existing arrangements to be a “compromise,” Hague announced in his first statement to the House following their adoption that “the policy is clear, and above all I want to make it clear that its *direction* is clear: we must be prepared to do more in a situation of such slaughter and suffering, and a more static policy would not measure up to the gravity of the situation.”⁸⁷⁴ This direction was further reinforced on 15 March, when Cameron joined his French counterpart François Hollande in calling for further amendments to the embargo during a press conference in Brussels.⁸⁷⁵ It was not until April, following weeks of ambiguity, that Hague acknowledged publicly that further amendments would mean lifting the embargo. In a statement following the G8 foreign ministers’ meeting, the Foreign Secretary announced that Britain and France would approach the next renewal period seeking further amendments to the embargo, “or even to lift it all together.”⁸⁷⁶

Lifting the embargo amounted to a decisive break with the multilateralism that had been a central part of the British strategy outlined in the previous chapter. In what was subsequently

⁸⁷² Ibid. See also Michael Gordon, “US Steps up Aid to Syrian Opposition, Pledging \$60 Million,” *New York Times*, 28 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/world/middleeast/us-pledges-60-million-to-syrian-opposition.html?mcubz=1>

⁸⁷³ HC Deb, 15/04/13, c. 16-17WS.

⁸⁷⁴ HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 968, emphasis added.

⁸⁷⁵ Prime Minister’s Office, “Transcript of Brussels Press Conference,” 15 March 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-of-brussels-press-conference>

⁸⁷⁶ HC Deb, 15/04/13, c. 38.

described by the Chairman of the FAC as a “bold unilateral statement,” the Foreign Secretary announced that Britain would be willing to take “domestic measures” where further amendments could not be secured.⁸⁷⁷ As explained in a House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, this “could be taken as a veiled threat that unless the sanctions regime accords with UK views, the UK could veto the next extension.”⁸⁷⁸ The Prime Minister reiterated this boldness in Brussels, declaring that, “Britain is a sovereign country; we have our own foreign security and defence policies. If we want to take individual action, we think that’s in our national interest, of course we’re free to do so.”⁸⁷⁹

This set the stage for a major diplomatic showdown at the Foreign Affairs Council in May. Aside from leaving the existing measures in place, the EU’s foreign ministers could either support an Anglo-French proposal to lift the embargo while maintaining sanctions, or else adopt the “compromise” supported by 25 states, including those who were strongly opposed to arming the opposition.⁸⁸⁰ This compromise would have further relaxed the embargo, either providing a specific list of those items allowed, or a list of those blacklisted. However, this move would have been delayed until August, and would have required a further consensus vote before becoming operational, meaning any member state could veto it. In talks that lasted 14 hours, Hague led the way in obstructing the consensus, and in a show of brinkmanship he used the threat of a British veto to force EU foreign ministers to accept an immediate lifting of the embargo.⁸⁸¹ The Conclusions stated that EU states had agreed not to proceed with arms transfers immediately and that the position would be renewed again in August, but future

⁸⁷⁷ Liaison Committee, “Oral Evidence,” 12 March 2013, Ev. 45; HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 968.

⁸⁷⁸ Ben Smith, “Syria: The EU Embargo and Moves to Arm the Opposition,” House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, SNIA/6593, 16 April 2013, 5.

⁸⁷⁹ Prime Minister’s Office “Brussels Press Conference,” 15 March 2013.

⁸⁸⁰ Ian Traynor, “Syria: UN Mission in Doubt as EU Lifts Arms Embargo: Peacekeepers May Quit Key Post on Israel Border: Fears Decision Forced by Britain Could Deepen Crisis,” *The Guardian*, 29 May 2013.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*

decisions had been returned to the national level.⁸⁸² Although the British government continued to rule out making any final decisions, it could now credibly threaten to do so in future.⁸⁸³ In short, the outcome paved the way for Britain to begin sending lethal military assistance.

The idea that Britain desired these changes to the embargo purely for the purposes of keeping the options open or to send a “signal” to Assad, as was often claimed at the time, is simply not plausible. As the following section demonstrates, the government made many forceful arguments in favour of arming the opposition and even when not explicitly championing this position, the logic inherent in much official rhetoric generally precluded any alternative. More significantly though, that the government was determined to overcome the significant legal and diplomatic obstacles described above is quite revealing. If exploring the options was the only agenda, this was an excessive and unrealistic price to pay. When one adds to the diplomatic and legal obstacles the domestic political ones that are described in the third section of this chapter, the lengths that Cameron and Hague were willing to go to in order to lift the embargo leads to the conclusion that both were, even without having made any final decisions, strongly in favour of arming the insurgency. In fact, British officials have since admitted that in their belief, the intention behind lifting the embargo was to arm the opposition.⁸⁸⁴ In both word and deed, British policy was clearly headed in this direction from March 2013 at the very latest.

British policy made this shift despite no fundamental change of approach from the US. The previous chapter described briefly how Obama had a more cautious view of the Syrian conflict and rejected proposals, from Petraeus and Clinton, to provide military assistance to the opposition in the summer of 2012. There were many within the US administration supportive of a more interventionist approach, including key advisors such Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power and, perhaps to a lesser extent, John Kerry, who succeeded Clinton as Secretary of State in

⁸⁸² Council of the European Union, Foreign Affairs, 3241st Council Meeting, 27-28 May 2013, 11-12, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137317.pdf

⁸⁸³ FCO, “Foreign Secretary’s Statement on EU Arms Embargo,” 28 May 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretarys-statement-on-syria-arms-embargo>

⁸⁸⁴ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 144.

February 2013.⁸⁸⁵ The deterioration in the conflict, in addition to the subsequent problems experienced in Libya, merely reinforced their President's caution.⁸⁸⁶ Rhodes describes in his memoir how he presented Obama with an opportunity to meet a handful of journalists who had visited Syria, hoping that the encounter and the description of the worsening situation would win the President over toward a more interventionist policy, before realising that, "where I heard a call to action, Obama had heard a cautionary tale."⁸⁸⁷ This would mirror the approach subsequently taken by many Conservative backbenchers, as later described in this chapter. As a consequence of the White House's unwillingness to get involved in the Syrian conflict, the US did not follow Britain in sending non-lethal military equipment to the opposition in Spring, focusing instead on increases in food and medical aid.⁸⁸⁸ When Obama belatedly decided to provide limited military aid to the rebels in June, he did so solely in response to growing evidence that Assad's forces were using chemical weapons, an issue that he viewed in isolation from the wider conflict.⁸⁸⁹ Obama, as Ryan Lizza described, was a "consequentialist."⁸⁹⁰ In fact, his approach to foreign policy, while drawing upon different antecedents, had much in common with the conservative-pragmatism described in Chapter Two.

An Interventionist Logic

The worsening of the violence in Syria was a necessary if insufficient reason for a change in British policy. During this period, Assad's forces increased their resort to the use of heavy weapons such as barrel bombs and by mid-2013 Western intelligence agencies were also

⁸⁸⁵ Rhodes, *World As It Is*; Ch. 16; John Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), Kindle, Ch. 19.

⁸⁸⁶ US diplomat Christopher Stephen was assassinated in Benghazi in September 2012.

⁸⁸⁷ Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 16.

⁸⁸⁸ Jay Solomon, "US to Provide Food, Medicine to Syrian Fighters," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 February 2013.

⁸⁸⁹ This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

⁸⁹⁰ Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist; How The Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker*, 26 April 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>

alleging the regime was using chemical weapons on a small scale.⁸⁹¹ Regime forces continued to benefit from Iranian support and the intervention of Hezbollah, unforeseen by Western governments, made a significant difference on the ground.⁸⁹² On the other side, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey increased their poorly coordinated support for the opposition groups, further fuelling the conflagration. Within the opposition, the strength of extremist groups increased, laying the ground for the subsequent emergence of ISIS.⁸⁹³ All sides increasingly succumbed to a sectarian narrative, raising the prospect of large scale massacres and further undermining the possibility of a political solution. Different actors and commentators interpreted these developments in different ways, but from the perspective of the British government the worsening situation both intensified the moral fury with Assad and magnified the shortcomings of the existing diplomacy-first strategy.

The government did not fundamentally revise its view of the conflict, despite the developments listed above. As some commentators and politicians began to speak of an “Arab winter,” the British government launched a concerted effort to reinforce its preferred narrative. It was with this objective in mind that Cameron spoke before the UN in September 2012 and warned his audience against drawing the wrong conclusions from Syria. Acknowledging the situation did present “profound challenges,” Cameron would insist that “those who look at Syria today and blame the Arab Spring have got it the wrong way round. You can not blame the people for the behaviour of a brutal dictator.”⁸⁹⁴ These sentiments maintained the propensity for fusing moral judgement with an analysis of the situation.

⁸⁹¹ HC Deb, 08/05/2013, c. 21; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Urges Assad to Allow UN Team into Syria,” 16 May 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-urges-assad-to-allow-un-team-into-syria--2>; The White House, “Statement on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use,” 13 June 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

⁸⁹² Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 157-159; ICG, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*.

⁸⁹³ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*.

⁸⁹⁴ David Cameron, “Speech to the United Nations General Assembly,” 26 September 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-camersons-address-to-the-united-nations-general-assembly>

The lens within which the British government viewed the Syrian conflict remained based on an idealistic celebration of the Arab Spring and a Manichean view of the conflict. Ministers sought to counter the claims of those who forecast an “Arab winter” by reiterating the faith in the march of democratic progress. As Burt asserted in a speech celebrating the Foreign Office’s Arab Partnership, the current violence in Syria was “not the destination of the Arab Spring” and Hague and others continued to stick to the previous line that the Arab Spring was a “grievous blow” to Al Qaeda which “contained the seeds of their irrelevance,” even as growing evidence of extremism within the opposition began to emerge.⁸⁹⁵ As the Foreign Secretary warned on a separate occasion, “we must bear in mind that it suits the Syrian regime’s narrative to portray the opposition as a collection of extremist groups, whereas, as I pointed out earlier, the vast majority of them are not.”⁸⁹⁶ Although there were instances where Hague and Burt offered a more nuanced view of the conflict, it remains the case that the interpretive frame adopted in spring of 2011 was, at a fundamental level, impervious to revision. As the Foreign Secretary continued to argue, we “cannot revert to arrogant or outdated views.”⁸⁹⁷

In Syria, however, the failure of British policy to assist in the fulfilment of the idealistic promise of the Arab Spring was becoming increasingly clear. The shift in favour of arming the opposition was in part a reaction to the failures of this policy. When Hague began pledging increased support for the opposition in August, he linked this to a belated acceptance that Britain’s diplomatic efforts had largely failed to remove Assad from power and facilitate the transition that British policy desired.⁸⁹⁸ As the government edged closer toward lifting the embargo in March, the Foreign Secretary countered the sceptics by pointing out that the search

⁸⁹⁵ Alistair Burt, “Speech on the Arab Partnership,” 6 November 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-arab-partnership>; William Hague, “Countering Terrorism Overseas,” 14 February 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/countering-terrorism-overseas>

⁸⁹⁶ HC Deb, 15/04/2013, c. 50.

⁸⁹⁷ William Hague, “Speech at the Lord Mayor’s Easter Banquet,” 16 April 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-speech-at-the-lord-mayors-easter-banquet>

⁸⁹⁸ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Warns of Escalation of Violence in Syria,” 5 August 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-warns-of-escalation-of-violence-in-syria>; FCO, “Statement on Syria.”

for a diplomatic solution “has not worked for the previous two years,” adding that, “that being the case, it is not adequate to watch slaughter on this scale and say we will stick our heads in the sand about it. It is important to have a foreign policy that relieves human suffering and upholds human rights.”⁸⁹⁹

The existing approach therefore came to be seen not simply as a policy failure, but as a moral failure too. Cameron spoke in similar terms when he sought to overcome parliamentary scepticism by arguing that, “it is worth recalling—we should all recall it—the fact that current policies are not working for the people of Syria. Seventy thousand people are dead and this hateful regime is still in place.”⁹⁰⁰ Those who opposed the apparent direction of policy were seen as favouring “inaction” or “doing nothing,” suggesting that the existing strategy was not the inevitable consequences of Britain’s paltry influence over the conflict, but an approach which, if continued, was tantamount to a betrayal of its growing victims. Stark reminders of the inadequacy of efforts to forge a diplomatic solution therefore paved the way for a change of approach, without automatically determining the content of that change.

What did determine the content of that change was the perception of the alternatives. The government, and Cameron in particular, saw any softening of the position on Assad as morally unconscionable. Retaining the pattern of blurring the distinction between what would happen and what ought to happen, Cameron had reacted to the Russian veto in July by continuing to argue that, “the regime has done some truly dreadful things to its own people. I do not think any regime that carries out acts, as they have, against their own citizens and continues to do so by the way, should survive; I think that regime should go.”⁹⁰¹ The subsequent acceptance that the diplomatic approach had failed did not lead to any change in this position. In November, Cameron revealed, “when you watch the television now and you see helicopters, aeroplanes, bombing from the air whole districts of whole towns and cities, you know that Bashar Assad

⁸⁹⁹ HC Deb, 06/03/2013, cc. 970-71.

⁹⁰⁰ HC Deb, 20/03/2013, c. 923.

⁹⁰¹ Prime Minister’s Office, “Transcript: PM And Karzai.”

cannot possibly stay running his country. There are no circumstances in which he could be part of a transition for a peaceful Syria. So he has to go.’⁹⁰² Policy was therefore hostage to an overriding sense of moral outrage. When the Prime Minister was ultimately frustrated by his political opponents in June of 2013, he criticised the Labour Party, not so much for failing to appreciate the wisdom of his policy, but for failing to share his contempt for Assad.⁹⁰³ Refusing to withdraw this accusation, Cameron reiterated that ‘‘the point I was making was simply that, whenever we talk about these issues, we should put out there, front and centre, how much we abhor this form of dictatorship, brutalisation and use of chemical weapons. It cannot be said often enough and it needs to be said by everybody, all the time.’’⁹⁰⁴ This reflected the tendency for British policy to be a statement just as much as it was a solution tailored to a specific objective.

There were rare hints of a softening of this stance. In some instances, ministers adopted language which subtly shifted the presentation from insisting upon Assad’s departure as a moral necessity, toward the softer claim that the calls for regime change simply reflected their ‘‘view’’ as to what was necessary and appropriate.⁹⁰⁵ For example, in May Hague reaffirmed the British position that the Geneva communiqué ruled out the possibility of Assad participating in a transitional government, by stating that, ‘‘*my view*, like Secretary Kerry’s, is that Assad should have left long ago in order to save lives in his own country.’’⁹⁰⁶ Yet such indications, always shrouded in equivocation, were quickly contradicted by hawkish recalcitrance. Hague shared the same moral compass as Cameron. For example, when Peter Hain MP, a rare critic of Syria policy throughout 2012, challenged the Foreign Secretary to retreat from the insistence that Assad depart power, he responded by asserting that, ‘‘if he wants us to make a further

⁹⁰² Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Transcript of Prime Minister’s Q&A at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi,’’ 5 November 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transcript-of-prime-ministers-qa-at-zayed-university-abu-dhabi>

⁹⁰³ HC Deb, 19/06/13, c. 906.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid., c. 917.

⁹⁰⁵ HC Deb, 30/10/12, c 147; HC Deb, 20/05/ 2013, c. 919.

⁹⁰⁶ HC Deb, 20/05/2013, c. 919, emphasis added. For similar language from Cameron, see HC Deb 20/03/2013, c. 922.

compromise with forces who have killed indiscriminately and oppressed the people of their country with appalling human rights violations, I can tell him that that we are *unable* to do so.’⁹⁰⁷

All of this meant that the British policy was constrained within the parameters of what Cameron and Hague took to be morally and politically acceptable, a situation that did not allow for much manoeuvrability. Cameron had set the stage for this in his Brussels press conference in December 2012, when he informed Europe’s press that ‘‘people will ask in future years and generations, ‘What did you do? What action did you take in order to help deal with this situation? In order to help deal with this situation? In order to help bring about a transition? In order to help get rid of President Assad?’ There is no single simple answer but inaction and indifference are not options.’⁹⁰⁸ By treating the need for Assad’s removal as axiomatic and construing the existing approach as ‘‘inaction and indifference,’’ the government had effectively rendered arming the opposition as the only remaining option.

This process of reasoning, which relied just as much on a discrediting of the alternatives as it did on any positive argument in favour of increasing support for the opposition, was an element of continuity with the Libyan intervention. The government’s framing of the options would consistently suggest any form of action was preferable to ‘‘inaction,’’ a default setting which showed an innate preference for a more interventionist approach. In most instances, as the political context ruled out openly championing arming the rebels, Hague and Burt sought to paint the impression that not intervening was, at best, no less risky than the alternative, with the latter referring to the film *Argo* and succinctly concluding, ‘‘there are no good choices, there are only bad choices.’’⁹⁰⁹ On other occasions, the suspicion that ‘‘inaction’’ made its advocates culpable for the killings that were taking place was more explicit. By June Cameron was

⁹⁰⁷ HC Deb, 04/09/12, c. 146, emphasis added.

⁹⁰⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘European Council Press Conference,’’ 15 December 2012.

⁹⁰⁹ HC Deb, 21/05/2013, c. 1198.

publicly arguing that, “with 80,000 killed, 5 million fled from their homes, rising extremism and major regional instability, those who argue for inaction must realise that it has its consequences too.”⁹¹⁰

Another principle that formed a central part of the argument for a change of direction was a vague sense of proportionality. The refusal to rule out any options, including the prospect of full-scale military intervention, could be justified as a prudent approach to retaining flexibility but it was primarily a position that symbolized an evaluative assessment of the severity of the situation. As Hague explained in January, “yes, I am not ruling out options, but I do not think we can do so when we are facing a situation where a six-figure number of people might die this year.”⁹¹¹ The most salient and recurring theme in the Foreign Secretary’s rhetoric was the appeal that “we must be prepared to do more in a situation of such slaughter and suffering, and a more static policy would not measure up to the gravity of the situation.”⁹¹² The consideration of more drastic and high-risk options was presented as self-evidently appropriate in the context of the rising death toll.

Alongside the need to match British policy with “the gravity of the situation,” it was equally important that such a policy been seen as supporting the “right side.” In September, Hague declared at the “core group” of the Friends of Syria that, “the Syrian people have lost enough in lives, blood and suffering. It is down to us not to let them lose all hope too. They need to know that even when some countries still side with their oppressors, the vast majority of the world will stand with them and will support a peaceful and free future for the Syrian people.”⁹¹³ Having warned that drawing attention to extremism would hand a propaganda victory to Assad, Cameron sought to rally support in the Commons by insisting that, “we should stand for something else in the House and in this country—we should stand up for people who want

⁹¹⁰ HC Deb, 03/06/13, c. 1234.

⁹¹¹ HC Deb, 10/01/13, c. 490.

⁹¹² HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 968.

⁹¹³ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Statement.”

democracy, freedom and the sorts of things we take for granted right here.’⁹¹⁴ Burt was more nuanced in his assessment of the situation and more willing to acknowledge the arguments on both sides, but even he insisted that ‘‘there are millions of Syrians who want a peaceful and democratic future, and legitimate forces are fighting for their interests. We should be on their side.’’⁹¹⁵ There was no suggestion of playing the role of honest broker in search of a practicable peace deal. Instead, ministers took for granted the importance of British policy symbolising an ideological solidarity with the right side in this conflict.

Memories of Bosnia, while less prominent in official thinking than they were on the eve of the Libyan intervention, were another relevant factor. In March, Cameron began comparing the sceptics in Europe with those who had stood in the way of providing greater support for the Bosnian government in the 1990s.⁹¹⁶ By June, he made the same argument more explicitly, suggesting that, ‘‘those who argue against amending the arms embargo and doing more to support the opposition are making some of the same arguments used in the Bosnian conflict 20 years ago. We were told then, as we are now, that taking action would have bad consequences, but not taking action is a decision too, and in Bosnia it led to the slaughter of up to 200,000 people and did not stop the growth of extremism and radicalisation, but increased it.’’⁹¹⁷

If Bosnia compounded the arguments about inaction and moral responsibility, so too did Cameron and Hague’s understanding of Britain’s identity as an international actor. Both drew upon a narrative which encouraged an inflated sense of Britain’s influence and importance and injected Britain’s role in the world with a strong sense of moral purpose. They were fond of retelling the past glories of British history and foreign policy, with the Foreign Secretary having an especial interest in the slave trade.⁹¹⁸ The confrontation with Assad would fit within a well-worn story. As Cameron declared in his speech to the Lord Mayor’s Banquet in November, ‘‘we spoke up for the Arab Spring, led international action to support the Libyan people in

⁹¹⁴ HC Deb, 19/06/2013, c. 899.

⁹¹⁵ HC Deb, 11/07/2013, c. 623.

⁹¹⁶ HC Deb, 20/03/2013, c. 923.

⁹¹⁷ HC Deb, 03/06/13, c. 1239.

⁹¹⁸ BBC, ‘‘Reflections with Peter Hennessy.’’

getting rid of Gaddafi, stepped up the EU sanctions on Iran and are at the forefront of efforts to isolate Assad in Syria.’⁹¹⁹ Britain, as always, was both an international leader and a force for good. Viewed through the lens of this vision of Britain’s role in the world, the Syrian conflict implicated British prestige and moral standing. This was apparent in the way in which the conflict’s deterioration was presented as taking place “on our watch,” a position which subtly took for granted the notion that Britain was something more than a marginal outside actor in this affair.⁹²⁰ In April, as the government was clearly heading toward providing arms, Hague pledged that, ‘if no peaceful settlement is possible, the world will have to find other means of confronting Assad’s aggression and be ready to do more to support the opposition and save lives, and we are determined that Britain will not be found wanting.’⁹²¹ Having previously acknowledged the limited influence Britain had, policymakers began promising more at the very same time that the existing leverage was largely spent.

There was too a strategic case for greater British involvement. Of course, nobody could deny that the growing scale of the conflict, its potential challenge to regional stability and the increasing presence of Islamist extremists all impacted British interests in some way. If Burt could not persuade the doubters in Parliament, he could at least remind them that, “whatever is done—whatever decision is taken—nobody in this House can escape the fact that there is British interest in Syria. Accordingly, our main interest is in closing this down and ending the conflict. This is not a plea from me to arm; I am saying that unless the conflict is ended, British interests will continue to be further damaged.”⁹²² Much like Libya however, the presence of these interests did not easily translate into any particular set of policies.

⁹¹⁹ David Cameron, “Speech at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet,” 12 November 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-lord-mayors-banquet>

⁹²⁰ HC Deb, 17/12/2012, c. 566.

⁹²¹ Hague, “Speech at Easter Banquet.”

⁹²² HC Deb, 11/07/2013, c. 625.

Cameron and Hague clearly did see a national interest in supporting the Syrian opposition, but this judgement was primarily a by-product of the arguments already described, rather than a central driver of decision-making. Responding to the growing signs of extremism, Cameron suggested that, ‘the argument we must engage in is this: are we more likely to help the good elements of the opposition by standing back, or are we more likely to help by getting in there and shaping and giving that technical assistance, so that we can play a part in building up the Syrian opposition, so that they are a legitimate and credible alternative to this hateful regime?’⁹²³ Of course, the very same set of circumstances led others, including President Obama, to draw the opposite conclusion to the one that the British Prime Minister clearly favoured.

Yet regardless of how Cameron and others defined Britain’s national interest in this particular instance, the construction of policy derived more from an intuitive sense of what was morally right than a calculation as to how Britain’s humanitarian objectives could best be advanced. Illustrative of this pattern of thinking was Hague’s earnest appeal that:

We will all have to weigh heavily all the different sides of the argument, but we must bear in mind that, as things stand, people who have done nothing wrong—except to want dignity for their country and freedom for themselves—are being butchered. We must bear in mind what that does to their political opinions and whether that is acceptable, to us in the western world or to any part of the world. We will have to make our choice about that.⁹²⁴

Cameron appears to have taken a growing *personal* interest in the conflict and became increasingly determined that something had to be done. Senior figures within the government at the time noted the parallels with Tony Blair and in the media there was speculation that

⁹²³ HC Deb, 20/03/13, c. 923

⁹²⁴ HC Deb, 20/05/13, c. 912.

Samantha was urging her husband to do more to resolve the humanitarian situation.⁹²⁵ Insider accounts describe Cameron as increasingly obsessed with Syria during this period. D’Ancona refers to it as something that “verged on a fixation” and quotes an unnamed aide as saying, in the spring of 2013, that Cameron “talks about it *all the time*.”⁹²⁶ Although there is less anecdotal evidence available concerning the Foreign Secretary’s private thinking, it seems sensible to conclude that he was an equal party in the drive to arm the opposition and that he too was driven primarily by his personal convictions. Goodman’s account, which is in part based on an interview with Hague, suggests that in contrast to some of the sources cited above, the shift in approach originated with Hague and the Foreign Office. Goodman describes Hague as, “a driving force behind UK foreign policy in a way that many of his predecessors were not.”⁹²⁷ Hague viewed the choice confronting them as a “very important foreign policy and moral choice”⁹²⁸ and he was consistent in the heavy emphasis he placed on this moral dimension and on his passionate support for the Syrian opposition. Contemporary press reports suggest Hague was slightly more concerned about some of the practical issues than Cameron, but was “fully supportive” of the Prime Minister’s growing determination to provide arms and felt that peace talks were “doomed to fail.”⁹²⁹ Hague stepped down from government in 2015, apparently inspired by Angelina Jolie, to continue his quest to confront the issue of sexual violence in conflict, an issue he had first been able to pursue in relation to the Syrian conflict in 2012.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁵ Nicholas Watt, “Ministers Fear Blair ‘Parallels’ as David Cameron Pushes to Arm Syrian Rebels,” 6 June 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jun/06/blair-parallels-cameron-arms-syria-rebels>; Rowena Mason, “David Cameron: My Wife Doesn’t Tell Me What To Do About Syria,” *The Telegraph*, 21 July 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/10193355/David-Cameron-my-wife-doesnt-tell-me-what-to-do-about-Syria.html>

⁹²⁶ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 358, original emphasis.

⁹²⁷ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 281.

⁹²⁸ HC Deb, 20/05/2013, c. 909.

⁹²⁹ Tim Shipman and Matt Chorley, “Cabinet Split Over Plans to Arms Syrian Rebels: Cameron Under Pressure Amid Claims That Peace Talks Are ‘Doomed To Fail,’” *Mail Online*, 6 June 2013, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2336720/Cabinet-split-plans-arm-Syrian-rebels-Cameron-pressure-claims-peace-talks-doomed-fail.html>; Oliver Wright and Nigel Morris, “Cameron Faces Serious Cabinet Split Over Arming Syria Rebels,” *The Independent*, 5 June 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-faces-serious-cabinet-split-over-over-arming-syrian-rebels-8646433.html>

⁹³⁰ Jen Selby, “Angelina Jolie Inspired William Hague to Step Down from Government, Former Foreign Secretary Admits,” *The Independent*, 17 March 2015,

Despite the apparent sincerity of the commitment to saving the Syrian revolution, it is difficult to believe that ministers were genuinely convinced of the practical benefits of inserting more arms into the conflict. Burt recalls that in 2013 the FCO shifted its view on this issue in response to the growing use of heavy weapons by regime forces.⁹³¹ It is unclear why the previous cautiousness was revised, given the provision of small arms would do little to counter the increased threat. In February 2013, at the very time that Britain was moving more openly in the direction of arming the rebels, the *Telegraph* quoted what it described as a “confidential options paper” as warning supplying the opposition in this way “could also fuel further militarisation of the conflict, increase risks of dissemination among extremist groups and of arms proliferation in a post-Assad Syria. It could trigger an escalation in arms supplies and further involvement in the conflict by external supporters of the Assad regime.”⁹³² It was these kind of arguments that made members of Parliament on both sides of the political divide reluctant to endorse further British involvement. There was also little reason for revising the previous assumption that opposition disunity was a barrier to a more interventionist strategy. Although the National Coalition was initially celebrated as a “credible alternative,” such a conclusion was premature. It seems more likely that the British government embraced a sub-optimal outcome because a more genuine united opposition organization was simply not possible. This was suggested in Hague’s admission that, “I do not think that we shall see a better attempt to create an umbrella opposition group, and I think that we should therefore get behind this one.”⁹³³

The main rationalization for arming the opposition was that such a move would convince Assad that a military victory was unobtainable, thereby paving the way for some form of transition.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/angelina-jolie-inspired-william-hague-to-step-down-from-government-former-foreign-secretary-admits.html>

⁹³¹ Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 179.

⁹³² Waterfield and Sherlock, “Britain Could Ramp Up.”

⁹³³ HC Deb, 20/11/2012, c. 456.

Cameron persistently made the case that “Assad is most likely to change his view and accept a transition if he believes that he cannot win militarily.”⁹³⁴ The government even suggested that merely lifting the embargo, without actively taking advantage of this change, would alter the calculations in Damascus. In a debate on EU Sanctions policy in May, Burt asserted that “even without acting on it, providing an exemption from the current arms embargo for opposition forces would send a powerful and timely signal to both sides.”⁹³⁵ A related argument was the claim that providing arms could alter the balance of power on the ground, an objective embraced by the “core group” of the Friends of Syria. In a joint statement in April, the eleven participating states formally announced that “the ministers recalled that in the Rome meeting they underlined the right to self defense of the Syrian people and the need to change the balance of power on the ground.”⁹³⁶ This provocative diplomatic statement was not widely advertised by ministers at the time, but by June the Prime Minister himself was making similar arguments, suggesting that Britain should “help tip the balance that way” to increase the prospects of “political transition.”⁹³⁷

These arguments make little sense in the context of British Syria policy, even if they sound plausible when viewed in isolation. The actions of Turkey and the Gulf states were simply exacerbating the divisions within the opposition and weapons were quickly coming into the possession of extremist groups. These developments could force a stalemate but they were hardly consistent with the aim of civilian protection, still less that of democratic transition.

Although British support was more carefully targeted toward favoured recipients, arming more

⁹³⁴ HC Deb, 03/06/2013, c. 1239.

⁹³⁵ HC Deb, 21/05/2013, c. 1183.

⁹³⁶ “Joint Statement of the Participating Countries in the Istanbul Meeting on Syria,” 20 April 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-of-the-participating-countries-in-the-%C4%B0stanbul-meeting-on-syria_-20-april-2013.en.mfa. See also “Declaration by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,” 20 April 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/Declaration-by-the-National-Coalition-for-Syrian-Revolution-and-Opposition-Forces-20-April-2013.pdf; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Welcomes Declaration by Syrian National Coalition,” 21 April 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-welcomes-declaration-by-syrian-national-coalition--2>; FCO, “Friends of Syria Core Group – Final Communique,” 22 June 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/friends-of-syria-core-group-final-communique>

⁹³⁷ HC Deb, 03/06/2013, c. 1239.

“moderate” or “secular” forces would merely prolong the conflict by keeping these groups in the fight while failing to deliver a decisive victory. This argument was made by General Richards, who felt that any move which threatened to prolong the conflict without bringing it to a decisive termination might be, as warned the Attorney General in the summer of 2013, “inimical to our humanitarian purpose.”⁹³⁸ We know from contemporary media reports that the British military warned Cameron of this fact in June 2013, but there is no reason to suspect that the politicians were completely ignorant of this reality until such a late stage.⁹³⁹ The assertion that simply lifting the embargo would send a powerful signal was even less convincing. Without US support, such signalling would be largely symbolic. The lifting of the embargo simply had precisely the impact that the sceptics had warned, with Russia immediately responding with a fresh shipment of hardware to Assad.⁹⁴⁰ Cameron’s disingenuous response to this development was to suggest that as Moscow had consistently supported the regime, there was no causal connection between the lifting of the embargo and an act that was clearly intended to warn Britain away from increasing its involvement.⁹⁴¹

The government also made the case that arming the National Coalition could alter the balance of forces *within* the opposition. As described above, this was part of the national interest case for action. Hague argued that “giving our assistance to moderate forces and not to extremist

⁹³⁸ Richards, *Taking Command*, 320.

⁹³⁹ Ruth Sherlock, and Colin Freeman, “David Cameron Accused of Betraying Syrian Rebels,” *The Telegraph*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10180820/David-Cameron-accused-of-betraying-Syrian-rebels.html>; Steven Swinford, “David Cameron Warned Arming Syrian Rebels Could Embroil Britain in All-Out War,” *The Telegraph*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/-/10179226/David-Cameron-warned-arming-Syrian-rebels-could-embroil-Britain-in-all-out-war.html>; Christopher Hope and Colin Freeman, “Britain Could Still Arm the Syrian Rebels, William Hague Says,” *The Telegraph*, 16 July 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10183445/Britain-could-still-arm-the-Syrian-rebels-William-Hague-says.html>

⁹⁴⁰ Julian Borger and Dan Roberts, “Russia to Deliver Arms to Syria as Fears Rise of Proxy War,” *The Guardian*, 28 May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/28/israel-warns-russia-against-arming-syrian-rebels>

⁹⁴¹ HC Deb, 12/06/13, c. 331

forces is ... one way in which we can try to shape the situation in a more sensible direction.’’⁹⁴² As the threat of extremism increased, ministers claimed that British support for the ‘‘moderate’’ opposition ‘‘could help boost their appeal and effectiveness relative to extremist groups.’’⁹⁴³ This proposal did not take into consideration the obvious fact that the distinction between ‘‘moderate’’ and ‘‘extremist’’ was far blurrier than the rhetoric of the British government suggested.⁹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the multiple fighting groups had fluid alliances and ‘‘moderates’’ often fought alongside ‘‘extremists’’ in shifting ad hoc alliances.⁹⁴⁵ Hague insisted that Britain would only provide arms ‘‘under carefully controlled circumstances,’’ while ruling out clarifying these criteria with appeal to the mantra that ‘‘no decisions have been taken.’’⁹⁴⁶ Both he and Burt were forced to concede to their backbenchers that ultimately, the British government could not provide any guarantees that their fears would not be realised. Instead, Burt pointed out, ‘‘I can give a categorical assurance that it is *not the intention* of the United Kingdom,’’ an admission that suggested noble intentions mattered at least as much as practical outcomes.⁹⁴⁷

It would be surprising if the intelligence being received was not warning of these dangers, but in their public statements ministers appeared to rely heavily the politically motivated assurances provided by their favoured opposition leaders. Hague made clear that ‘‘given the chaotic situation in Syria, it is not possible to quantify accurately the number of extremist, or al-Qaeda supporting, fighters in Syria.’’⁹⁴⁸ Yet this recognition did not preclude his persistent view that they represented only a minority, despite the only concrete evidence offered to support this assertion being the promises he had received from the leadership of the National Coalition. He therefore went on to add that ‘‘in the opinion of opposition leaders, they represent a small

⁹⁴² HC Deb, 06/03/13, c. 971.

⁹⁴³ HC Deb, 15/05/13, c. 208W.

⁹⁴⁴ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 14-22.

⁹⁴⁶ HC Deb, 20/05/13, c. 905.

⁹⁴⁷ HC Deb, 27/02/13, c. 130WH.

⁹⁴⁸ HC Deb, 10/01/2013, c. 489.

minority of what is perhaps a six-figure number of opposition fighters.’⁹⁴⁹ While acknowledging the difficulties, the Foreign Secretary generally favoured this assessment, claiming that ‘‘acquaintance with the leading figures of the National Coalition corroborates that view.’’⁹⁵⁰

The relationship between threats to arm the opposition and prospects of a fresh attempt at a diplomatic breakthrough was another area of contention. The lifting of the arms embargo coincided with a diplomatic initiative, which culminated in a second conference in Geneva in January 2014. The initial impetus for this conference began following a meeting between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in May 2013.⁹⁵¹ According to Seldon and Snowdon’s account, British efforts to play an important role in these discussions were cut short by Kerry’s unwillingness to reveal the detail of his discussions with the Russians.⁹⁵² Preparations for Geneva II would remain stalled for months, but the timing of this development naturally led to questions about the relationship between arming the rebels and the potential success of this diplomatic conference. When Hague informed Parliament of the details of this development, he therefore insisted that ‘‘we must make it clear that if the regime does not negotiate seriously at the Geneva conference, no option is off the table.’’⁹⁵³ It was also suggested that the future prospect of British arms could be used to incentivise the opposition to participate, with Burt claiming that ‘‘it would tell moderate opposition forces and politicians not to lose faith in their fight against oppression or against the extremists who are seeking to capitalise on the continued instability.’’⁹⁵⁴ When some members of Parliament began to shift in favour of greater flexibility in Britain’s diplomatic position, arguing that this would increase the chance of success in Geneva, Cameron simply dodged the difficult questions by repeating his insistence Assad was more likely to comply if he was convinced of the

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid., c. 494.

⁹⁵¹ Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, Ch. 19.

⁹⁵² Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 330.

⁹⁵³ HC Deb, 20/05/2013, c. 905.

⁹⁵⁴ HC Deb, 21/05/2013, c. 1183.

impossibility of military victory.⁹⁵⁵ It was entirely coincidental that British moves to arm the rebels occurred at the very time that Kerry's diplomatic opening was made. Britain had little choice but to publicly argue that its policy was consistent with plans for Geneva II yet just weeks before Cameron and Hague had been justifying their search for amendments to the embargo on the basis that the search for a diplomatic solution had largely failed.⁹⁵⁶

The First Syria Veto

In the end, the government failed to actively take the step of arming the opposition, despite the political and diplomatic build-up described above. Broadly, there are two plausible reasons that the policy was abandoned and neither should be viewed as mutually exclusive. Firstly, Cameron and Hague might have finally succumbed to arguments concerning the limited practical and military value of such a policy. This is consistent with contemporary press reports, which suggest a decision was made to step back from arming the rebels on advice from the British military. Secondly, domestic political opposition and divisions within government would have also been a factor in any potential decision. Other members of the Cabinet did not necessarily share Cameron and Hague's enthusiasm for greater British involvement in the conflict and in Parliament there was strong opposition both from the Labour Party and from Conservative backbenchers.

According to a report in the *Telegraph* on 15 July, Downing Street "confirmed" that Cameron had ruled out providing arms, "on advice from the British military."⁹⁵⁷ It was claimed that military chiefs in the NSC had argued that "the conflict was now too advanced for basic weapons supplies to make much difference."⁹⁵⁸ Yet if military utility was an argument against providing arms, this was surely the case prior to July 2013. Richards' opposition to the government's approach did not suddenly emerge in the summer of 2013 and while the situation on the ground was continuing to escalate, it would be remarkable if the government was not

⁹⁵⁵ HC Deb, 03/06/2013, 1233-1260

⁹⁵⁶ HC Deb, 20/03/2013, c. 923.

⁹⁵⁷ Sherlock and Freeman, "David Cameron Accused."

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid. See also Swinford, "David Cameron Warned."

receiving similar advice in May, before it committed to lifting the embargo with all the diplomatic and political furore that this entailed. Hague immediately contradicted these reports in the FAC, insisting that British policy remained unchanged.⁹⁵⁹

The press also reported on the presence of divisions within government.⁹⁶⁰ Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Independent* claimed there were serious divisions in the cabinet over the wisdom of arming the rebels. Gove and Osborne supported Cameron's position. Defence Secretary Philip Hammond, while concerned that weapons might potentially fall under the possession of extremists, was also broadly supportive. However, it was reported that five or six ministers raised "serious reservations," including Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. As leader of the coalition's junior party, Clegg's position was especially important and the Lib Dem leader felt that there could not be a military solution to the conflict and that if Britain were to arm the rebels, it should only do so with the full support of the United States. Development Secretary Justine Greening also counted among the sceptics and concerns were raised that British arms might prolong the conflict and fall into the hands of extremist groups. Attorney General Dominic Grieve was also described as a "dove" who warned Cameron against intervening in Syria without a UN resolution and his persistence was apparently a source of frustration for the Prime Minister. Although a lack of detail about some of these splits and divisions precludes reaching firm conclusions, there is enough evidence to suggest this was a potentially significant factor.

In contrast, we can be far more certain about the position of Parliament, which steadfastly opposed greater British involvement in Syria. Having fully supported the government's decision to recognise the National Coalition, Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander was more sceptical about the increasing provision of "technical" assistance.⁹⁶¹ When suspicion began

⁹⁵⁹ FAC, "Oral Evidence," HC 268-i, 16 July 2013, Q. 2-3.

⁹⁶⁰ Wright and Morris, "Cameron Faces Split.," Shipman and Chorley, "Cabinet Split."

⁹⁶¹ HC Deb, 20/11/2012, cc. 446-447; HC Deb, 07/01/2013, cc. 95-96W; HC Deb, 14/03/2013, c. 315W; HC Deb, 21/03/2013, c. 780-81W.

growing in January and February of 2013 that the government might be willing to provide lethal equipment, Alexander made clear that the Labour Party would oppose such a move.⁹⁶²

Alexander reiterated a widely shared view in the Commons that providing arms would simply make the situation worse and that weapons might fall into the hands of jihadists. As the government's support for arming the opposition became clearer in the weeks and months ahead, Cameron was forced to concede the existence of an "honest disagreement" between himself and Miliband.⁹⁶³ While the tone of such debates was often cordial, the bipartisan consensus that had previously underpinned the Britain's Syria policy had entirely evaporated by the time that Hague's brinkmanship secured the government's objectives in the EU.

More significant than this breakdown of bipartisanship was a vociferous backbench rebellion against the direction of policy. For the period analysed in this chapter, Cameron and Hague were battling against the direction of political opinion within their own party, even if their position enjoyed support in some quarters.⁹⁶⁴ Key to this development was a bifurcation of parliamentary opinion on the conflict. Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, in their analysis of parliamentary discourse on the Syrian conflict, point to two rival or alternative perspectives. In addition to the discourse that drew upon the Arab Spring, they contend that an alternative narrative emerged which emphasised the differences with the Libyan case and the growing similarities with Iraq.⁹⁶⁵ During a debate to mark the tenth anniversary of the Iraq War, references to Syria were common.⁹⁶⁶ The consensus view was that Iraq presented a series of lessons, the overriding one being to not intervene.

However, the opposition of Conservative backbenchers is better explained, primarily, in reference to the tradition of conservative-pragmatism sketched in Chapter Two. Consistent with

⁹⁶² HC Deb, 10/01/2013, cc. 487-88; HC Deb, 06/03/2013, c. 966.

⁹⁶³ HC Deb, 03/06/2013, c. 1237.

⁹⁶⁴ Wright and Morris, "Cameron Faces Split."; Shipman and Chorley, "Cabinet Split."

⁹⁶⁵ Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, "Before the Vote" 881-882.

⁹⁶⁶ HC Deb, 13/06/2013, cc. 522-594.

their bleak view of human nature, these MPs rejected the government's Manichean framing of the conflict and the emphasis on democracy and universal values, seeing instead a complex and messy affair where rival warring parties were equally guilty of atrocities. This general feeling was captured in crude terms by Gerald Howarth, who declared that "the House and the country need to be clear on whether the good boys are on one side and the evil boys on the other, or whether there are faults on both sides."⁹⁶⁷ Similarly, while Cameron and Hague presented optimistic arguments about the ability of outsiders like Britain to positively influence developments, their backbenchers applied a much more conservative estimate of their capacity to achieve any desirable outcome, instead suggesting that British involvement could further aggravate the situation. For example, during the "Debate on the Address" in May, John Redwood warned Cameron, "to be very careful about the idea that killing some more Syrians might be a helpful contribution to an extremely dangerous situation."⁹⁶⁸ This was not just a rejection of a specific set of policies because of the recent memory of Iraq, but a manifestation of rival philosophical approaches whose antecedents go back much further. In some respects, Cameron was correct in his efforts to draw parallels with Bosnia. His backbenchers echoed the anti-interventionist philosophy of the Major government, in both style and substance.⁹⁶⁹

More importantly, backbench opposition to the Coalition's policy acquired a formal edge. In the context of the Commons' growing assertiveness and the cementing of precedents concerning its right to vote on military deployments, many sought to extend this power further. In Parliament, Conservative backbencher John Baron led the way in demanding that the government allow Parliament to vote in advance of any decision to send arms.⁹⁷⁰ On 5 June his colleague Andrew Bridgen handed a letter to the Prime Minister, signed by 81 Conservative MPs, expressing

⁹⁶⁷ HC Deb, 21/05/2013, c. 1176.

⁹⁶⁸ HC Deb, 08/05/2013, c. 32.

⁹⁶⁹ The attitudes and arguments described here were common in the House of Commons throughout late 2012 and the first half of 2013. For particularly relevant debates, see HC Deb, 19/03/2013, c. 797-809; HC Deb 21/05/2013, c. 1175-1199; HC Deb, 03/06/2013, cc. 1233-1260.

⁹⁷⁰ Baron has been a longstanding opponent of British intervention and the ideas of liberal intervention. See John Baron, *Hard Choices; Britain's Foreign Policy for A Dangerous World* (London: Politeia, 2017).

concerns that Britain might become involved in the Syrian conflict and calling for a vote ahead of any decision to supply arms.⁹⁷¹ The government had initially resisted these demands. In April, Hague had responded to pressure in Parliament only by suggesting that the House would have a right to “express its view.”⁹⁷² The growing weight of pressure placed Cameron and Hague in a difficult position. On the one hand, they did not want to be seen as ignoring parliamentary opinion or obstructing the growth in its democratic power, yet on the other hand they knew that such a move would set a dangerous precedent and weaken their capacity to act.

The weight of this political pressure forced Hague to concede on 18 June that pursuing a policy without parliamentary support was “neither feasible nor desirable” before adding that “so of course we have made clear there would be a vote.”⁹⁷³ It took a further pledge on 10th July to reassure the opponents of the government’s Syria policy, with Hague confirming that any decision on sending arms would be “put to the House on a substantive motion.”⁹⁷⁴ In a backbench debate the following day, a debate originally organised by Baron in order to mobilize pressure for this concession, the Tory rebel celebrated the success of this bipartisan coalition in asserting parliamentary power, beginning his statement by correctly pointing out that “in many ways, the debate on this matter has already been a success.”⁹⁷⁵ This debate also served as a further demonstration of the growing strength of feeling on this issue. Although the motion was supposed to be limited to whether Parliament should have the right to vote, most of the participants instead used it as an opportunity to make clear their position on the substantive issue of arms to the rebels. Opposition to government policy was clear and overwhelming, if that had not already been the case. Hague and Cameron would now need an extremely powerful whipping operation to compel their own backbenchers into supporting their stance, or else rely on Miliband and Alexander to reverse course. The whips apparently informed Cameron such

⁹⁷¹ HC Deb, 06/06/2013, cc. 1678-1679.

⁹⁷² HC Deb, 23/04/2013, c. 761.

⁹⁷³ HC Deb, 18/06/2013, c. 746.

⁹⁷⁴ HC Deb, 10/07/2013, c. 379.

⁹⁷⁵ HC Deb, 11/07/2013, c. 587.

support would not be forthcoming and the prospect of Miliband reversing his position was no more likely.⁹⁷⁶

It is true that military advice would have discouraged Cameron and Hague from continuing on their path toward intervention via proxy. It is also worth pointing out that despite returning decision-making to the state level, EU members had agreed not to proceed with any arms transfers until August in order to allow the Geneva negotiations to proceed.⁹⁷⁷ It is also true that whatever enthusiasm the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary had for arming Bashar Assad's opponents, such enthusiasm was far from universal within the Cabinet and the NSC. Yet all of this appears superfluous given the incontrovertible fact Parliament would have blocked any move to arm the opposition, with or without the presence of the above factors. The Commons exercised what was effectively a de facto veto over the government's Syria policy, by forcing it to acquiesce to an extension of its right to vote ahead of any decisions and in the process of mobilizing to secure this demand, demonstrating the full strength of parliamentary opinion against further British involvement in the conflict. This lesser known chapter in the Commons's growing war powers has largely escaped scholarly attention, yet it is important both in its own right and in providing a precursor for the vote against military action in August.

Conclusions

Britain's Syria policy took a decidedly interventionist turn in the latter half of 2012, as the limits of the diplomatic route became impossible to deny and the violence on the ground continued to worsen. If Britain could not intervene directly, this did not rule out intervention via proxy. Accordingly, Britain pushed for the removal of the EU's arms embargo and succeeded in securing this outcome in May 2013. That Cameron and Hague persisted with this course of action, in the face of opposition both domestically and internationally, is testament to the

⁹⁷⁶ Swinford, "David Cameron Warned."

⁹⁷⁷ Council of the European Union, 3241st Council Meeting, 11-12.

strength of their determination to increase British involvement in the conflict. If the previous chapter showed how divisions in the international community constrained the interventionist impulses of the Coalition government in 2011 and early 2012, this chapter has shown how domestic political forces fulfilled a similar role in 2013.

The move toward arming the rebels was driven by a strong moral conviction and an intuitive sense that continuing to insist on Assad's departure and increasing support for his opponents was the only morally defensible option. Considerations about the practical consequences of this strategy appear to have played a distant second place in the thinking of Cameron and Hague, whose approach to this issue resided more in the domain of abstract principle than practicability, notwithstanding their previous claims to be prudent and pragmatic. What mattered most to the advocates of arming the rebels was that Britain was doing *something*, not whether that something was likely to improve the situation or advance the government's stated objective of saving lives and ending the conflict.

The arguments made both in favour of arming the opposition, and against the available alternatives, are consistent with an uncompromising set of principles that have strong parallels with the Libyan intervention and strong parallels with previous British interventions in Iraq and Kosovo. These included an approach to decision-making that privileged moral convictions ahead of more practical and strategic concerns, a reflexive suspicion toward "inaction," an unrealistic level of optimism in the possibility of military solutions and a tendency toward viewing conflicts in black-and-white terms. It is also worth reiterating that while Britain persisted with a multilateral strategy throughout 2011 and much of 2012, British advocacy of lifting the embargo amounted to a decisive break with this approach and a willingness to pursue more unilateral solutions.

Within the British government, the key advocate of this approach was, again, Prime Minister Cameron and both ministers and officials noted the similarities with Blair. However, Foreign Secretary Hague was a key figure in the development of British Syria policy and was clearly

supportive of this approach also. It is significant that there were some divisions over this policy in the NSC and especially significant that Nick Clegg was reportedly among the sceptics. In many ways, Clegg shared the interventionist vision of Cameron and others. He supported intervention in Libya, referred to himself as a “liberal interventionist” and, as the following chapter shows, he was an automatic and firm supporter of military action following the Ghouta attacks just a few weeks later. The common denominator appears to be the importance of the US position in Clegg’s calculation.

These internal divisions and the advice from the British military may be part of the explanation for why Britain ultimately failed to take the step of providing arms to the Free Syrian Army in the summer of 2013. What is more certain though, is that parliamentary opposition made it all but impossible for Cameron and Hague to pursue this route by forcing the government to acquiesce to a vote and thereby paralysing the ability of the British government to act on the international stage. The Conservative backbenchers who led this rebellion were guided by a fundamentally different set of principles, a fundamentally different framing of the Syrian war, and a more narrow vision of the British national interest that harked back to the Major era and beyond.

Chapter Seven: Syria: The Ghouta Attack

On 21 August 2013, news broke of a chemical weapons (CW) attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. While not the first attack of its kind, this atrocity differed in scale from those that had preceded it. President Obama, determined to defend the ‘‘red line’’ against the use of chemical weapons he had first announced in August 2012, momentarily abandoned his cautious stance on greater US involvement in the conflict and proposed a round of air strikes against the Assad regime. The British government quickly pledged to participate in pending military action, but again found its determination to confront Assad thwarted by parliamentary opposition, this time in far more dramatic fashion. On 29 August 2013, having been recalled early from their summer recess, MPs voted 285-272 against a government motion in support of military action. It was the first Parliamentary defeat for a British government on an issue of foreign policy since 1782.⁹⁷⁸

Existing academic literature has sought to explain the outcome of the vote and its future implications for British foreign policy.⁹⁷⁹ While these are both self-evidently worthy areas of enquiry, the reasons and motivations behind the government’s original decision to pursue the military option has received scant attention. Once more, we are left to rely primarily on the ‘‘insider’’ accounts of D’Ancona and Seldon and Snowdon, both of which are also primarily focused on the politics of the vote.⁹⁸⁰ While these accounts offer a narrative which reconstructs some of the key developments in the frenetic period between 21st and 29th August, they do not offer a systematic evaluation of the reasons the government felt military action was necessary. Instead, the narrative is written as if answers to such questions can be taken for granted: military action was simply a natural and inevitable response to an atrocity of this kind. The

⁹⁷⁸ History of Parliament, ‘‘House of Commons and Foreign Policy.’’

⁹⁷⁹ Strong, ‘‘Why Parliament Now Decides,’’; Strong, ‘‘Interpreting The Syria Vote,’’; Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 5-33; Gaskarth, ‘‘Decline and Denial,’’; Kaarbo and Kenealy, ‘‘No Prime Minister!’’; Kaarbo and Kenealy, ‘‘Precedents, Parliaments and Foreign Policy,’’; Mello, ‘‘Curbing the Royal Prerogative,’’; Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, ‘‘Before The Vote.’’

⁹⁸⁰ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 378-389; Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron At 10*, 325-345.

primary purpose of this chapter is to therefore fill this gap by reconstructing the government's response to the chemical attacks and demonstrating how and why it favoured military action.

There are two main parts to this chapter. The first part is a more or less chronological reconstruction of British policy. It begins with Obama's declaration of a "red line" in August 2012 and outlines Britain's stance in relation to this announcement and to growing reports of CW use in the conflict. The bulk of the analysis focuses on the period between 21 and 29 August 2013, showing how the demands of a military timetable set in Washington forced the government to recall Parliament from its summer recess and enter into negotiations with the Opposition in an increasingly desperate attempt to secure enough votes in the Commons. It shows that the key figures within the British government, especially Prime Minister Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Clegg, reached a very quick judgement that military force against Assad was appropriate and necessary, in circumstances where there were legitimate doubts about what exactly had happened in Damascus, the practical consequences of military action remained unclear and the legal implications of acting without UN support were contentious.

The second part of the chapter examines in greater depth the reasons and motivations that led to the proposal for military action. It suggests there were, broadly, three interrelated motivations behind the resort to intervention. Firstly, this episode should not be seen in isolation but should instead be located within the wider context of the development of Britain's policy toward the Syrian conflict. The Ghouta atrocity, by leading to a decisive change in US policy, created an opportunity for the interventionists in the British government at a juncture where they were otherwise out of options. Secondly, the key rationale emphasised by government ministers was the need to uphold norms against the use of CW. From this perspective, this was about more than just the Syrian conflict and this combined both moral and national interest arguments about the need to deter further use of such weapons. Thirdly, military action had an intuitive appeal as it satisfied a powerful and pervasive feeling that "something must be done" and was represented as taking a principled stand against the atrocity and punishing the alleged transgressor as a form of international justice. The analysis further shows that, much like its

approach to the Libyan crisis, the government placed a heavy emphasis on moral arguments and repeatedly emphasised the risks of inaction ahead of any serious discussion of the possible consequences of military force.

The sources that this chapter can draw upon are more limited. For previous chapters, the analysis could often cite the evidence sessions of various parliamentary committees. Even where this was not available, the timeframe of the events in question left months and months of official statements and parliamentary debates, during which policy evolved gradually and was subject to consistent scrutiny. In this instance, there were a mere eight days between the attack itself and the vote in Parliament. As a source of evidence, the debate in the Commons provides an extensive window into parliamentary attitudes toward the use of force but it is more problematic as a source of governmental attitudes, given the overriding need to win votes. The first section draws heavily on a series of insider accounts, narratives written on the basis of interviews with some of the key participants in the events being described.⁹⁸¹ By cross-referencing these accounts and supplementing the analysis with other primary source material, such as statements made by ministers and the publicly released Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) assessment, a more definitive account of the events can be provided. In assessing the motives behind the proposals for military action, the analysis in the second section combines the claims made in some of the insider accounts with detailed scrutiny of the public statements and interviews given by Cameron, Clegg and Hague in response to Ghouta and the lengthy statement and debate in Parliament on 29 August.

⁹⁸¹ Ibid. See also Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 5-33; BBC, *The Syria Vote: One Day in August*, BBC Radio 4, 10 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04nrqsk>; BBC, *The World's War*, Episode 1.

The Red Line and the Commons Veto

Previous chapters suggested that the US position on the Syrian conflict, specifically the reluctance of President Obama to support greater American involvement, was a constraint on British policy. Britain could not entertain the possibility of military options without substantial US support. While Obama had called for Assad's departure, his obvious caution undermined the credibility of the threatening rhetoric made by the British government. In August 2012, approximately a year prior to the Ghouta attack, Obama had publicly made clear that one thing that might cause him to change his position would be the use of chemical weapons. The US President set out a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons, warning that:

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus.⁹⁸²

The British position on the red line sought to closely align with that of its larger ally. In the aftermath of the President's comments, following a phone call between Obama, Cameron and French President Hollande, Downing Street quoted the two leaders as agreeing that the use of such weapons would cause them to "revisit their approach so far."⁹⁸³ Hague reinforced this stance in his statement to the House of Commons on 3 September, referring to Obama's "very strong warning" on this issue.⁹⁸⁴ When Obama chose to reiterate the red line in December, apparently in response to intelligence indicating possible movement of Syrian CW stockpiles, the Foreign Secretary again echoed this position, promising that the use of such weapons would "draw a serious response from the international community."⁹⁸⁵ He

⁹⁸² The White House, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," 20 August 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

⁹⁸³ Prime Minister's Office, "Prime Minister's Phone Calls With Presidents Hollande and Obama," 23 August 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-ministers-phone-calls-with-presidents-hollande-and-obama>

⁹⁸⁴ HC Deb, 03/09/2012, c. 64.

⁹⁸⁵ HC Deb, 04/12/2012, c. 719.

reinforced this threat at the Friends of Syria meeting, warning that “the Assad regime should not doubt our resolve, or miscalculate how we would react to any use of chemical or biological weapons against the Syrian people.”⁹⁸⁶

Such rhetoric certainly ratcheted up the likelihood of military action in future, but it was not part of a clear strategy. When asked in Parliament what Obama had meant when he threatened “severe consequences,” Hague simply avoided providing a direct answer.⁹⁸⁷ Despite the potential implications of the red line, many in the Obama administration, including the military, were unclear as to what their president had intended by his original comments.⁹⁸⁸ For the US, this utterance appeared to transcend the Syrian conflict, placing the entire credibility of US foreign policy at stake. As Defence Secretary Leon Panetta recalled, “when the president as commander in chief draws a red line, it is critical that he act if the line is crossed.”⁹⁸⁹ For Britain, it was arguably less critical. In the summer of 2013, while many in the British government were not indifferent to the growing use of chemical weapons and concerns about their security, their primary focus was increasing support for the rebel forces, as was detailed in the previous chapter. Whereas Cameron and Hague genuinely favoured increasing military support to the rebels, Obama’s decision to sanction limited military assistance to rebel groups in June, which amounted to an important reversal of his previous policy on support for the opposition, was intended to defend the red line.⁹⁹⁰

From the British perspective, the use of CW was something that further encouraged and justified the interventionist trajectory of British policy throughout 2013. Initially, the government did not differentiate the issue of CW from the wider dynamics and dilemmas that emerged from the conflict. When asked why chemical attacks should be treated differently from attacks using conventional weapons, Hague did not explain that it was important to uphold the

⁹⁸⁶ FCO, “Friends of the Syrian People.”

⁹⁸⁷ HC Deb, 04/12/2012, c. 719.

⁹⁸⁸ Seymour Hersh, “The Red Line and the Rat Line,” *London Review of Books* 36, no. 8 (2014): 21; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 178.

⁹⁸⁹ Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 450.

⁹⁹⁰ Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 18.

wider system of rules against using CW. Instead, he simply put it that chemical weapons were “even more abhorrent” than anything they had seen so far.⁹⁹¹ The use of CW was then cited in support of Britain’s evolving position on the arms embargo. In Prime Minister’s Questions in March, for example, Cameron explained that, “the French president and I are concerned that we should not be restricted for months and months ahead when we do not know exactly what could happen in Syria – there are very worrying reports of the use of chemical weapons.”⁹⁹² Further reports of its use were seen as a vindication of Britain’s anti-Assad position, at a time when some MPs were questioning why Britain was not considering a more flexible negotiating position. For example, when reacting to the possibility of Assad participating in a transitional government, Cameron proclaimed that “in my view, someone who has seen the murder of up to 80,000 people, the destruction of so many communities and the use of chemical weapons has no part to play in the Government of a civilised country.”⁹⁹³

Throughout this period, Western governments had been slowly accumulating evidence relating to the use of these weapons. In March 2013, in the context of growing claims and counter claims that CW were being deployed in the conflict, a UN investigation was mandated. It was at this stage that British intelligence began to slowly gather evidence of what it claimed were CW deployments by regime forces. By May, Cameron was able to announce that the UK had gathered “limited but credible evidence” of the small-scale use of such weapons, for which it held the Assad regime responsible.⁹⁹⁴ Samples were tested at Porton Down and information provided to UN investigators.⁹⁹⁵ By the time of the attacks in August, it was the judgement of British intelligence that the regime was responsible for at least fourteen separate incidents of chemical weapons use but on a relatively limited scale.⁹⁹⁶ When enquiring about the possible

⁹⁹¹ HC Deb, 04/12/2013, c. 719.

⁹⁹² HC Deb, 20/03/2013, c. 922.

⁹⁹³ HC Deb, 03/06/2013, c. 1258

⁹⁹⁴ HC Deb, 08/05/2013, c. 21

⁹⁹⁵ HC Deb, 01/07/2013, c. 509W.

⁹⁹⁶ Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), “Letter to the Prime Minister,” 29 August 2013, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/235094/Jp_115_JD_PM_Syria_Reported_Chemical_Weapon_Use_with_annex.pdf

motives behind such use, the government speculated that Assad was “testing” the resolve of the international community.⁹⁹⁷ Such an assumption naturally shaped the way in which it reacted to their use on a much larger scale. As the JIC assessment of Ghouta explained, in reference to these fourteen previous attacks, “a clear pattern of regime use has therefore been established.”⁹⁹⁸

The Ghouta attack on 21 August was therefore not the first use of CW in this conflict, but its scale was certainly greater.⁹⁹⁹ News of the attack travelled fast, not only because of the 24-7 media environment but because social media was soon saturated with uploaded videos of alleged victims. For the US, this was a threat to American credibility given Obama’s previous warning to Damascus. On this occasion, Obama’s response was unusually swift and decisive, at least initially. Within the administration, there was near unanimous agreement in favour of military action and so the debate was on when and how to strike, not whether.¹⁰⁰⁰ On the day of the attacks, Obama spoke to Cameron and the two agreed on the need for further discussion.¹⁰⁰¹ The timing of the Ghouta attack is an idiosyncrasy that explains, in part, some of the political chaos that resulted in Britain. Parliament was in recess and many members of the government, including Cameron and Clegg, were in the middle of their holidays.¹⁰⁰²

In public, the initial response of the British government strongly condemned the attacks and emphasised the importance of UN access to the site.¹⁰⁰³ We know there was a second phone call

⁹⁹⁷ HC Deb, 20/05/2013, c. 916.

⁹⁹⁸ JIC, “Letter to Prime Minister.”

⁹⁹⁹ For the relevant UN investigation see UN Secretary General. *Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013*.

<https://www.un.org/zh/focus/northafrica/cwinvestigation.pdf>. See also Human Rights Watch, *Attacks on Ghouta; Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria*, September 2013; BBC News, “Syria Chemical Attack: What We Know,” 24 September 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23927399>.

¹⁰⁰⁰ For first-hand accounts see Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 18.; Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, Ch. 19.

¹⁰⁰¹ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 331

¹⁰⁰² Ibid, 332; D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 378.

¹⁰⁰³ FCO, “Foreign Secretary Concerned At Reports of Chemical Attack in Syria,” 21 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-concerned-at-reports-of-chemical-attack-in-syria>; FCO, “Foreign Secretary Press Conference With French Foreign Minister,” 21 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-press-conference-with-french-foreign->

between Obama and Cameron on 24 August. According to Seldon and Snowden's account, Obama informed Cameron that America would be commencing military action as early as Monday 26 August and Cameron indicated his support.¹⁰⁰⁴ Following this conversation, the Prime Minister announced that officials had been tasked with "examining all the options," and warned that significant use of chemical weapons merited a "serious response from the international community."¹⁰⁰⁵ From this point onwards, Hague and others began playing down what could be achieved by the UN inspectors, pointing to the ongoing bombardment of the area and the absence of a mandate to apportion blame.¹⁰⁰⁶ Behind the scenes, there was a meeting of key advisers at Chequers on Sunday 25 August, which sought to explore how Britain might provide military support.¹⁰⁰⁷ According to one insider, this was seen as very difficult within the US timetable. Seldon and Snowden claim that Cameron then wrote a "note" to Obama, supporting intervention but seeking reassurance on the issue of establishing exactly what happened, providing a clear legal basis and securing UN support.¹⁰⁰⁸ The US delayed taking action, most likely because of the presence of the inspection team.¹⁰⁰⁹

The decision to recall Parliament was made on Monday 26 August.¹⁰¹⁰ As Parliament was due to return from summer recess the following Monday in any case, this decision was not necessary unless parliamentary approval was being sought for action that would take place that weekend. By 26 August at the very latest then, the British government had decided, in

minister; FCO, "Foreign Secretary: UN Must Get Access to Chemical Attack Site," 23 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-un-must-get-access-to-chemical-attack-site>

¹⁰⁰⁴ Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 331.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Prime Minister's Office, "Syria: PM Phone Call With President Obama and Prime Minister Harper," 24 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-pm-phone-call-with-president-obama-and-prime-minister-harper>

¹⁰⁰⁶ FCO, "Foreign Secretary: We Cannot Allow Chemical Weapons to Be Used With Impunity," 25 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-we-cannot-allow-chemical-weapons-to-be-used-with-impunity>; Prime Minister's Office, "Syria: PM Call With Chancellor Merkel," 25 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-pm-call-with-chancellor-merkel>

¹⁰⁰⁷ Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 332. Little detail about this meeting is provided. The participants included Llewellyn, National Security Advisor Kim Darroch and, apparently, General Richards.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid; Rhodes, *World As It Is*, Ch. 18.

¹⁰¹⁰ Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, 334.

principle, to support US-led military action against the Assad regime. Cameron, Clegg, Osborne and Hague, the key players within the Coalition government, reassembled in London and established what D’Ancona describes as a ‘‘virtual war cabinet.’’¹⁰¹¹ The decision to recall Parliament was announced early on 27 August and on that day a clear effort was made to prepare both public and parliamentary opinion for swift military action. Both Cameron and Clegg gave interviews in which they made the case for intervention, while Hague set out the arguments in an article for the *Telegraph*.¹⁰¹²

Over the following two days, the priority of the government was on persuading the Labour Party to support the motion in Parliament. It is these discussions that are the focus of many of the insider accounts.¹⁰¹³ Knowing that Labour support would likely prove essential if the motion were to pass, the Coalition was forced into a series of concessions. As Clegg later recalled, ‘‘we had bent over backwards,’’ and ‘‘changed our motion constantly, even right up until the last minute.’’¹⁰¹⁴ On the Labour side, the two participants were Miliband and Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander and both made clear they would only support the government’s motion under certain conditions. The government therefore had to adapt its motion to meet the demands of the Labour duo, incorporating their insistence that the inspectors be allowed to complete their work and the government should make a sincere effort to secure a UN resolution authorising action. Even after this concession, Miliband informed Cameron late on 28 August that he could only support the government if it agreed to a further second vote. Knowing that Labour support would be essential, Cameron was belatedly forced to make a concession which

¹⁰¹¹ D’Ancona, *In It Together*. 379.

¹⁰¹² Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Syria: Transcript of PM’s Interview,’’ 27 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-transcript-of-pms-interview>; Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Syria: Transcript of Nick Clegg’s Interview,’’ 27 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-transcript-of-nick-cleggs-interview>; William Hague, ‘‘This Is A Moment for Democratic Nations to Live up to their Values,’’ *The Telegraph*, 27 August 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10268360/William-Hague-this-is-a-moment-for-democratic-nations-to-live-up-to-their-values.html>

¹⁰¹³ The follow description draws upon Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron At 10*, 334-340; BBC, *The Syria Vote*; Goodman, *Imperial Premiership*, 5-24; D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 379-381.

¹⁰¹⁴ LBC, ‘‘Nick Clegg: Agreement on Syria Likely To Be Elusive,’’ 5 September 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CY6FT8zWZU>

entirely ruled out the prospect of military action that weekend, which was the sole purpose for having recalled Parliament earlier.

Two main explanations have been offered to explain the Labour position. Firstly, many on the government side suspect straightforward political opportunism from Miliband, who seized a chance to inflict a humiliating defeat on his opponent. Secondly, there is some suggestion that Labour equivocation was the result of internal disagreement within the party and that it was following discussions with senior Labour colleagues that Miliband began backtracking.¹⁰¹⁵

Regardless of the above factors, the position of Miliband and Alexander was consistent with a more traditional, liberal internationalist perspective. In their private discussions with the government, and in their statements during the debate in Parliament, both individuals placed greater emphasis on international law and on the role of the UN. They prized “process” over instinct and caution over hawkishness, even if supportive of some form of military action in principle. This was also consistent with Labour’s previous policy toward the Syrian conflict throughout 2013, which had been to oppose greater British involvement in the conflict and called for the continued search for diplomatic solutions instead of threatening to arm the rebels.¹⁰¹⁶

The motion that was presented to Parliament on 29 August was just as much a reflection of Labour’s demands than a statement of the government’s original intentions. The motion called for military action, in principle, for the purpose of “saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria’s chemical weapons.”¹⁰¹⁷ It called for allowing the UN inspectors to complete their work and committing to a UN process prior to military action. Finally, it also made clear that a further, second vote in the House of Commons would be required before any military action. It is often now forgotten that even if the government had won the vote on 29

¹⁰¹⁵ The split was between Alexander and Shadow Defence Secretary Jim Murphy. See Jim Murphy, “Conscientious Objection Isn’t a Legitimate Posture for Britain in the Face of ISIS Ferocity,” *The New Statesman*, 21 October 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/10/conscientious-objection-isn-t-legitimate-posture-britain-face-isis-ferocity>

¹⁰¹⁶ See, for example, HC Deb, 10/01/2013, cc. 486-488; HC Deb, 20/05/2013, cc. 906-908.

¹⁰¹⁷ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1425.

August, this would not have provided an automatic mandate for air strikes. The outcome of the vote was a narrow defeat for the government, with 272 voting for the motion and 285 against. 30 Conservative and 11 Liberal Democrat MPs voted against their own government.¹⁰¹⁸ Labour tabled its own alternative motion that was in key respects identical to the government's motion, the major difference being its call for the presentation of "compelling evidence" to first establish Assad's responsibility for the attack.¹⁰¹⁹ The Labour motion was also defeated. In the aftermath of this defeat, Hague contemplated resigning and Osborne publicly stated that the episode would lead to much "national soul searching about our role in the world."¹⁰²⁰

It is worth commenting on the circumstances in which Cameron, Clegg and other key figures in the government quickly reached the conclusion that there was no alternative to a military response. This decision was not the outcome of an extensive deliberation. According to D'Ancona's account of the initial reaction to news of the attacks, Cameron and Ed Llewellyn, his Chief of Staff, instantly agreed that "something bloody well needed to happen."¹⁰²¹ Seldon and Snowdon paint a similar picture, writing that Cameron "knows what it means the moment he hears."¹⁰²² They were not the only ones who reached a quick judgement as to who was responsible and what was an appropriate response. The Conservative leader spoke to his Liberal Democrat counterpart while the latter was still on holiday. Clegg, in his own words, "didn't need long to think about it. If Obama thought it was right to remove chemical weapons from the battlefield, why would we not?"¹⁰²³ These anecdotes suggest that the key decision-makers simply did not feel it was necessary to have a lengthy discussion and assess in detail the different options and their potential risks. Furthermore, even if they had felt this was necessary,

¹⁰¹⁸ For the full list of Conservative rebels see *The Guardian*, "Syria Debate: The Tory Rebels Who Voted Against Government Military Action," 30 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/30/syria-debate-tory-rebels>

¹⁰¹⁹ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1440.

¹⁰²⁰ BBC, "Syria Crisis: Cameron Loses Commons Vote on Syria Action," 30 August 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-23892783>. On Hague's reaction, see Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 342-344.

¹⁰²¹ D'Ancona, *In It Together*, 378.

¹⁰²² Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 331.

¹⁰²³ *Ibid.*, 332.

there was little time for discussion. The NSC did not have the opportunity to discuss pending military action until 28 August, at which point Parliament had already been recalled to provide a mandate for action. Cabinet did not even discuss the situation until the morning of the vote.

As a result of this, when publicly questioned on the practicability of military action, the objectives of air strikes and the possible consequences, it was shown that little consideration had been given to these questions. The media quoted former military chiefs openly questioning the proposed intervention, suggesting nobody knew the possible consequences of airstrikes.¹⁰²⁴ Behind the scenes, the government struggled with poor communication from the US, which meant committing to support military action without necessarily understanding what this might entail.¹⁰²⁵ In Parliament, the Prime Minister repeatedly described the objective of military action as “detering and degrading,”¹⁰²⁶ yet when Jack Straw enquired *how* military action would achieve this purpose, Cameron responded by claiming, “I do not want to set out at the Dispatch Box a list of targets, but it is perfectly simple and straightforward to think of actions that we could take relating to the command and control of the use of chemical weapons, and the people and buildings involved, that would indeed deter and degrade.”¹⁰²⁷ Many MPs focused on practical issues such as these in the debate and the fact that it was not so “simple and straightforward” as Cameron wished it to be explains why neither he nor any other member of the government ever explained what these simple and straightforward actions were.

The speed and confidence with which the government determined that Assad was responsible is another factor worthy of comment. It was natural for the government to quickly see the attack as a vindication of its longstanding anti-Assad position. Hague declared on the day of the attacks that, “I hope this will wake up some who have supported the Assad regime to realise its

¹⁰²⁴ The critics included former CDS Lord Dannatt, and General Richards, who had retired the previous month. See Frances Elliott, Alexandra Frean and Catherine Philp, “West Set For Missile Strike: Cameron Recalls Parliament for Debate on Action Against Syria,” *The Times*, 28 August 2013; Tim Ross and Peter Dominczak, “Syria: We Must Act Now Against Assad, Says Cameron,” *The Telegraph*, 27 August 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10269876/Syria-we-must-act-now-against-Assad-says-Cameron.html>

¹⁰²⁵ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 331-333.

¹⁰²⁶ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1430, 1434, 1436-1439.

¹⁰²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29/08/2013, c. 1436.

murderous and barbaric nature: a government that cares so little for the lives of its own country.’’¹⁰²⁸ While initially calling for UN access, statements such as this hinted toward a predetermined verdict. Already by the 23 August, Hague was dismissing the possibility of a ‘‘conspiracy’’ as ‘‘vanishingly small.’’¹⁰²⁹ By 25 August, Cameron was quoted as saying there was ‘‘little doubt’’ that Assad was responsible and on 27 August, in an article in the *Telegraph*, Hague determined that the evidence left ‘‘no doubt’’ that Assad was responsible.¹⁰³⁰ The JIC, which first met on 25 August, reaffirmed its confidence in the verdict of regime culpability on the 27 August.¹⁰³¹ In the intelligence summary that was made public, while conceding a lack of clarity about the motives for the attacks, the JIC said it was ‘‘highly confident’’ in its assessment of regime responsibility.¹⁰³²

The argument that there could be no doubt about Assad’s guilt, at such an early stage and with apparently so little investigation, was largely based on circumstantial evidence, as was shown in the JIC assessment. When listing this evidence ministers referred to factors such as the regime’s prior use of CW, the claim that its forces were bombarding the area when the attack took place, and the fact that they continued to shell the area afterwards, thereby undermining the possibility of the UN gathering evidence.¹⁰³³ Most importantly though, was the argument that the opposition forces simply lacked the capability to execute a CW attack, still less one on this scale. The JIC summed up this point with the claim that there were therefore ‘‘no alternative scenarios to regime responsibility.’’¹⁰³⁴ All of this provided firm grounds for suspecting that regime forces were responsible for the attack, but there was no clear trail of evidence leading directly back to Assad.

¹⁰²⁸ FCO, ‘‘Press Conference with French Foreign Minister.’’

¹⁰²⁹ FCO, ‘‘UN Must Get Access.’’

¹⁰³⁰ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Call With Chancellor Merkel,’’; Hague, ‘‘This Is A Moment.’’

¹⁰³¹ JIC, ‘‘Letter to Prime Minister.’’

¹⁰³² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³³ *See*, for example, Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Phone Call with Obama,’’; FCO, ‘‘We Cannot Allow,’’; Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Syria Chemical Weapons Attack: PM Call with President Obama,’’ 28 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-chemical-weapons-attack-pm-call-with-president-obama>; LBC, ‘‘Call Clegg: 29 August 2013,’’ 29 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQfbT-Rnqq4>

¹⁰³⁴ JIC, ‘‘Letter to Prime Minister.’’

The question mark in this version of events was the absence of a convincing explanation for Assad's motives in ordering such an attack, especially given the nearby presence of the UN inspection team. This was the one action that was likely to provoke US entry into the conflict and it was also timed to coincide with the very moment when the inspectors were arriving in Damascus. The JIC and the Prime Minister conceded that the motivations for the attack were unclear. Facing this question in Parliament, Cameron offered that, "for my part, I think the most likely possibility is that Assad has been testing the boundaries. At least 14 uses and no response—he wants to know whether the world will respond to the use of these weapons, which I suspect, tragically and repulsively, are proving quite effective on the battlefield."¹⁰³⁵ Such speculation clearly encouraged the perceived necessity of a military response to prevent further uses.

According to a contemporary report, British officials fretted over what to include in the intelligence assessment that was made public.¹⁰³⁶ This report implied that officials were concerned not because they were agonising over whether to disclose sensitive material, but instead because most of the intelligence they had was open source and therefore already in the public domain. When the Obama administration later defended its insistence that Assad and only Assad could have been responsible, it placed significant emphasis on intercepted communications. In the US government intelligence assessment that was publicly released on 30 August, reference was made to human, geospatial and signals intelligence.¹⁰³⁷ John Kerry would later insist that it was signals intelligence that proved Assad's guilt.¹⁰³⁸ Yet the JIC assessment that was released made no reference to signals intelligence and in Parliament on 29 August Cameron was unusually candid in conceding that there was no secret piece of intelligence that further strengthened the case against Assad:

¹⁰³⁵ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c 1433.

¹⁰³⁶ Elliott, Frean and Philp, "West Set for Missile Strike."

¹⁰³⁷ The White House, "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21 2013," Office of the Press Secretary, 30 August 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>

¹⁰³⁸ Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, Ch. 19.

I am not standing here and saying that there is some piece or pieces of intelligence that I have seen, or the JIC has seen, that the world will not see, that convince me that I am right and anyone who disagrees with me is wrong. I am saying that this is a judgment; we all have to reach a judgment about what happened and who was responsible.¹⁰³⁹

Cameron would repeatedly insist upon the importance of forming a “judgment”¹⁰⁴⁰ but many MPs, particularly on the Labour benches, did not understand why it was necessary to reach such a judgment quite so quickly, while evidence was still being gathered, investigations were still taking place and legitimate doubts remained. Whatever partisan motivations he may or may not have had for voting against the government’s motion, Miliband’s insistence that “evidence should precede decision” and that Britain should not be rushed by a “timetable that was set elsewhere” illustrated the difference between Cameron and Clegg on the one hand, and the more cautious and methodical instincts of their Labour counterpart on the other.¹⁰⁴¹

Finally, the legal case for action was far from clear. As had occurred for Libya, the government published a “note” providing what it described as a summary of the legal position, based on advice provided by the Attorney General.¹⁰⁴² Again, the Attorney General did not take formal responsibility for this in the same way that Lord Goldsmith had done in the case of Iraq. The document is therefore understood, from a legal perspective, to constitute the *view* of the British government.¹⁰⁴³ Unlike in Libya however, on this occasion there was no Security Council resolution authorising force. The government was in the process of tabling a resolution in New York, as per Labour’s demands, but it did so in the knowledge that it would be vetoed by both

¹⁰³⁹ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1432.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ibid., c. 1433,1436-37

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid., cc 1441-1442.

¹⁰⁴² HM Government, “Chemical Weapons Use By Syrian Regime – UK Government Legal Position,” https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/235098/Chemical-weapon-use-by-Syrian-regime-UK-government-legal-position.pdf

¹⁰⁴³ Arman Sarvarian, “Written Evidence Submitted to the House of Commons Defence Committee,” *Intervention: Why, When and How?* 7 February 2014, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/952/952vw12.htm>

Russia and China.¹⁰⁴⁴ The legal case relied exclusively on an untested and unsupported “doctrine of humanitarian intervention.”¹⁰⁴⁵

The conventional view of the legal use of force in international affairs holds that it is only justified in situations of self-defence or when the express approval of the Security Council is obtained. The position of the British government on the use of force in international affairs is that this “doctrine of humanitarian intervention” empowers it to take “exceptional measures” without Security Council approval for the purpose of alleviating humanitarian suffering. As the Defence Committee subsequently suggested, it is doubtful that this interpretation of international law and the doctrine of humanitarian intervention is widely accepted among the international community.¹⁰⁴⁶ Yet even if one were to accept this doctrine, the criteria it contained were not self-evidently satisfied in this case. For instance, the second criteria insisted that “it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved.”¹⁰⁴⁷

It would appear that the key figures in the government instinctively felt military force was needed and then worked backwards from this conclusion, treating international law as an obstacle that needed to be navigated around, rather than a principle that ought to be upheld. Reflecting this pattern of thinking, Cameron acknowledged that a Chapter VII resolution would be preferable, but he spoke about international law as if it was something that could be agreed or disagreed with, depending on how one felt about the ethical consequences:

However, it cannot be the case that that [A UN Resolution] is the only way to have a legal basis for action, and we should consider for a moment what the consequences would be if that were the case. I cannot think of any Member from any party who would want to sign up to that.¹⁰⁴⁸

¹⁰⁴⁴ Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10*, 336.

¹⁰⁴⁵ HM Government, “Legal Position.”

¹⁰⁴⁶ Defence Committee, *Intervention: Why, When and How?* Fourteenth Report of Session 2013-14, Volume 1, HC 952, 25-26.

¹⁰⁴⁷ HM Government, “Legal Position.”

¹⁰⁴⁸ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1429.

The Motives for Action

The motives behind the proposals for military strikes can be roughly broken into three main categories. Firstly, this episode should be located within the context of the government's longstanding policy toward the Syrian conflict, its hostility toward Assad and the frustration with its lack of leverage. Britain had first spent over a year prioritising the pursuit of a UN resolution, while calling for Assad to leave power immediately. This strategy had resulted in Russia and China vetoing three separate resolutions and ended in failure in the summer of 2012. The government had followed this by spending the first half of 2013 increasing its support for the Syrian opposition and lifting the EU's arms embargo in preparation for an attempt to provide lethal military assistance. With Parliament having acquired the right to vote on any decision to send arms, this option was blocked off also. In sum, British policy in the summer of 2013 had reached a dead end and policymakers were out of options. From this perspective, the Ghouta attack provided an opportunity, through its impact on the US position, for Britain to finally do something to match its anti-Assad rhetoric with tangible action.

Despite the above facts, the government itself sought to compartmentalise the issue of CW, arguing that its proposals for military action were entirely separate from its wider position on the conflict. When he first publicly made the case for military action, Cameron insisted that “this is not about wars in the Middle East. This is not even about the Syrian conflict. It is about the use of chemical weapons and making sure, as a world, we deter their use and we deter the appalling scenes that we've all seen on our television scenes.”¹⁰⁴⁹ The government's parliamentary motion was explicit, stating that “it does not sanction any action in Syria with wider objectives.”¹⁰⁵⁰ The Prime Minister repeatedly tried to reassure his parliamentary colleagues of this point, arguing that, “it is not about invading, it is not about regime change,

¹⁰⁴⁹ Prime Minister's Office, “Transcript of PM's Interview.”

¹⁰⁵⁰ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1426.

and it is not even about working more closely with the opposition; it is about the large scale use of chemical weapons and our response to a war crime – nothing else.’’¹⁰⁵¹

There is good evidence for arguing that this kind of rhetoric misrepresented the government’s motivations. Based on the research presented in preceding chapters, it cannot be denied that both Cameron and Hague favoured a more interventionist approach throughout 2013.

Regardless of the extent to which it recognised the wider need to uphold rules against the use of chemical weapons, this motive, at least prior to August 2013, was not treated as entirely separate from the government’s wider policy and its growing inclination to pursue a more interventionist approach. For example, at the end of June, Cameron warned Parliament that:

There is a growing risk to the peace and stability of Syria’s neighbours and the long-standing international prohibition on chemical weapons is being breached by a dictator who is brutalising his people. None of this constitutes an argument for plunging in recklessly. We will not do so, and we will not take any major actions without first coming to this House. But we cannot simply ignore this continuing slaughter.¹⁰⁵²

Secondly, D’Ancona’s account suggests that the Prime Minister did not initially emphasise the importance of norms against CW use, seeing Ghouta instead as an opportunity to bomb Assad into considering negotiations. When describing the initial discussions between Cameron and Miliband, he writes of how Cameron informed the Labour leader that the goal was to ‘‘shock’’ Assad to the negotiating table in order to design a new Syria, invoking an analogy with the Dayton Agreement for the former Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁵³ D’Ancona does not really press the important implications of this revelation. If true, it would clearly suggest that the public presentation of Britain’s aims was not simply disingenuous but was closer to outright fabrication.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵² HC Deb, 19/06/2013, c. 895.

¹⁰⁵³ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 380.

Even if the anecdote above is misleading or untrue, the government must have considered the implications of airstrikes in relation to the wider dynamics of the Syrian conflict and its policy toward it. Miliband made a point of emphatically rejecting Cameron's effort to argue that the proposal should be considered in isolation from the wider conflict.¹⁰⁵⁴ The Prime Minister therefore argued that airstrikes were consistent with Britain's policy toward Syria, by reintroducing the very same arguments he had used in used when advocating arming the opposition. While some feared airstrikes might hinder the possibility of a second round of Geneva negotiations, Cameron drew the opposing conclusion, arguing that, "for as long as Assad is able to defy international will and get away with chemical attacks on his people, I believe that he will feel little if any pressure to come to the negotiating table."¹⁰⁵⁵ This shows that even if this were not the primary motivation for military action, the pre-existing inclination to adopt a more interventionist approach to Syria would have led Cameron and others to have responded favourably when the opportunity to intervene arose suddenly in response to Ghouta.

The second key motivation behind the proposal for military action was embedded in the logic of the red line. Specifically, military action was seen as a way of deterring the future use of CW, thereby upholding rules and norms against its use in conflict. While the British government offered a wide range of arguments in support of its case the most consistent theme in official rhetoric was the argument that the crossing of this particular threshold required some form of action, both to deter the Assad government from repeat offences, and to deter future dictators from similar excesses. Cameron therefore spoke repeatedly about the norm or "taboo" against the use of chemical weapons and the fact that this was one hundred years old.¹⁰⁵⁶ In response to a direct question as to why Britain was considering military action, Clegg explained that failing to take such action would set a dangerous precedent, "where brutal dictators and brutal rulers will feel they can get away with using chemical weapons on a larger and larger scale in

¹⁰⁵⁴ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1441.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Ibid*, c. 1438

¹⁰⁵⁶ Prime Minister's Office, "Transcript of PM's Interview."

future.’’¹⁰⁵⁷ Following the NSC meeting on 28 August, Hague explained that the use of such weapons must be confronted because ‘‘if we don’t do so, then we will have to confront even bigger war crimes in the future.’’¹⁰⁵⁸ The motion presented in Parliament referred to the objective of ‘‘detering further use of Syria’s chemical weapons,’’¹⁰⁵⁹ while the note on the legal position referred to ‘‘detering or disrupting.’’¹⁰⁶⁰ Cameron was therefore able to locate the British national interest at the heart of his argument, asking the Commons ‘‘is it not in the British national interest that rules about chemical weapons are upheld? In my view, of course it is, and that is why I believe we should not stand idly by.’’¹⁰⁶¹

In making this argument, the government showed continuity with previous Syria policy, and with its intervention in Libya, through its emphasis on the costs of non-intervention. Conjoined with the argument about the need to defend the international norm against CW use was a framing of every alternative to force as form of moral indifference. Action, understood exclusively as military force, was contrasted with an imagined passivity. If there was one phrase that was repeated more than any other in the effort to mobilize public and parliamentary opinion in favour of air strikes, it was the argument that ‘‘the world shouldn’t stand idly by.’’¹⁰⁶² It was not only that the same basic logic was repeated by Cameron, Clegg and Hague at every opportunity, but that the specific word ‘‘idle’’ was frequently a key part of this binary distinction between action and inaction.¹⁰⁶³ In this framing, it was not a choice between air strikes as a policy proposal and various alternatives that may or may not have culminated in the use of force, but instead between taking a stand on behalf of civilization and succumbing to a form of moral weakness. The latter would have its consequences. Much as had been the case in

¹⁰⁵⁷ Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Nick Clegg’s Interview.’’

¹⁰⁵⁸ FCO, ‘‘Foreign Secretary Calls for Strong International Response to Chemical Attack in Syria,’’ 28 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-calls-for-strong-international-response-to-chemical-attack-in-syria>

¹⁰⁵⁹ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1425.

¹⁰⁶⁰ HM Government, ‘‘Government Legal Position.’’

¹⁰⁶¹ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1435.

¹⁰⁶² Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Transcript of PM’s Interview.’’

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid; Deputy Prime Minister’s Office, ‘‘Nick Clegg’s Interview,’’; HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1435.

the build up to the Libya, the interventionists in the British government reminded the sceptics that “inaction is not a choice without consequences.”¹⁰⁶⁴

The third and final reason that the government sought to pursue military action is much harder to pin down. In contrast to the arguments about deterrence, which presented a succinct and rational objective for launching airstrikes, the determination to take a stand arose as much from sentiment and symbolism as it did from calculation. The images of the young victims of the atrocity, instantly beamed around the world through modern communications, provoked an emotional reaction. This mood is captured in D’Ancona’s account, which describes how the images were apparently “intolerable,” to those who had children themselves and presents a narrative in which military force can be taken for granted as necessary and inevitable in response to such shocking scenes on television and social media.¹⁰⁶⁵ Cameron informed Parliament that, “I believe that anyone in this Chamber who has not seen these videos should force themselves to watch them. One can never forget the sight of children’s bodies stored in ice, and young men and women gasping for air and suffering the most agonising deaths – all inflicted by weapons that have been outlawed for nearly a century.”¹⁰⁶⁶ Perhaps the best representative of the emotional dimension to the government’s response was the reaction of Michael Gove, the only openly neoconservative member of the government, who lost his temper and began shouting at Labour MPs in the aftermath of the vote. Gove later explained that, “I did feel incredibly emotional, I do feel incredibly emotional, about this subject.”¹⁰⁶⁷ The reaction of many in the British government was not simply a policy response, but a more general sense of outrage and indignation and military force intuitively resonated with such feelings in a way that alternative options or calls for greater patience did not.

Part of this intuitive appeal can be inferred from the manner in which military force symbolised taking a stand on behalf of values that Britain was assumed to represent and in a

¹⁰⁶⁴ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1542.

¹⁰⁶⁵ D’Ancona, *In It Together*, 378.

¹⁰⁶⁶ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1431.

¹⁰⁶⁷ BBC News, “Michael Gove: Syria Vote Defeat ‘Got To Me,’” 3 September 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-23942033>

manner that was consistent with assumptions about Britain's leading role in international society. In his article for the *Telegraph* on 27 August, Hague had described this as "a moment for democratic nations to live up to their values."¹⁰⁶⁸ Following the NSC meeting the next day, he announced that, "we decided unanimously that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime is unacceptable and that the world can not stand by in the face of that."¹⁰⁶⁹ Such grandiose language showed how Hague took for granted an exaggerated sense of Britain's leadership in world affairs. Similarly, in closing the debate in Parliament, Clegg described the attack as "an affront to humanitarian law and to our values."¹⁰⁷⁰ While notions of Britain's role in the world had not been central to the discussion, the Deputy Prime Minister opined that "there is another question facing us tonight, which is what kind of nation are we? Are we open or closed? Are we engaged in shaping the world around us, or shunning the difficult dilemmas that we face?"¹⁰⁷¹

Military action also fulfilled a desire to "do something." Burt later recalled a general sentiment within the government that "*something* must be done."¹⁰⁷² Such a feeling naturally arose from the perception of the alternatives which, as described above, were seen as "inaction" and "idleness" in the face of atrocities. Clegg therefore explained in an interview on the day of the debate that when facing the question of how to respond to such an atrocity "it would not rest very easily on my conscience, if when faced with that choice, we basically walked on the other side of the road."¹⁰⁷³ The argument for intervention appealed because policy-makers were again operating at a relatively high level of abstraction. It was much easier to agree with the general idea that Britain ought to do *something*, as opposed to having to address difficult questions about how that "something" was consistent with the objectives claimed to be driving policy, whether it was legal and why it had to take place immediately.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Hague, "This Is A Moment."

¹⁰⁶⁹ FCO, "Strong International Response."

¹⁰⁷⁰ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1442.

¹⁰⁷¹ *Ibid.*, c. 1545.

¹⁰⁷² BBC, *The Syria Vote*, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷³ LBC, "Call Clegg."

The appeal of military force was also consistent with a desire to punish Assad. As previous chapters have documented, the Coalition government warmly committed itself to an agenda of “international justice,” and the Prime Minister had promised a “day of reckoning” for the Syrian dictator. It was thus natural to see military force as consistent with this, a means of providing accountability through non-judicial means. As early as 25 August, Cameron declared that, “this crime must not be swept under the carpet.”¹⁰⁷⁴ Frequent description of the atrocity as a “crime,” and discussion of the need to deny “impunity,” while true in one sense, were in another implying that military force was being proposed as a form of punishment.¹⁰⁷⁵ This rationale was picked up on and questioned by MPs, with Conservative backbencher James Arbuthnot referring to a “new doctrine of punishment as a reason for going to war – not deterrence, not self-defence, not protection, but punishment.”¹⁰⁷⁶ These objectives were not necessarily mutually exclusive in the way Arbuthnot was suggesting, but it remains the case that the rhetoric of Western governments conflated two distinct and separate areas of international law, namely international humanitarian law and international criminal law.¹⁰⁷⁷

Conclusions

The period analysed in this chapter will long be remembered, primarily, as a major fiasco and an historic exercise in the House of Commons’ war powers. This chapter has suggested it should also be studied as an episode that sheds light on the attitudes of the Coalition government to the use of force. The key decision-makers in the government quickly and instinctively reached the judgement that military force was a necessary and appropriate response to the Ghouta atrocity. Rather than cautiously assessing the options, waiting for the

¹⁰⁷⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, “Syria: Phone Call With President Hollande,” 25 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-pm-phone-call-with-president-hollande>

¹⁰⁷⁵ For this kind of language, *see also* FCO, “We Cannot Allow”; FCO, ‘Foreign Secretary Discusses Motion For Parliamentary Debate on Syria,’ 28 August 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-discusses-motion-for-parliamentary-debate-on-syria>; HC Deb, 29/08/2013, c. 1426.

¹⁰⁷⁶ HC Deb, 29/08/2013, 1462. *See also* *ibid*, c. 1452, 1463, 1498 for similar observations.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Carsten Stahn, “Syria and the Semantics of Intervention, Aggression and Punishment: On ‘Red Lines’ and ‘Blurred Lines,’” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11, no. 5 (2013): 955-977.

UN inspectors and legitimising its position in the Security Council, the British government responded quickly and favourably to US proposals for immediate military action without UN support. Having made this commitment in principle, Parliament had to be recalled early from its summer recess, a decision that was only necessary if military force was to take place as early as the weekend of the 31 August. Cameron and others made a series of concessions in an ultimately futile attempt to win Labour support, meaning that the eventual vote would not in any case have automatically led to military action. This episode demonstrates that the government was far from cautious in its approach, in contrast to the impression it often liked to present. The threshold that it required, in terms of defining the military objectives, providing evidence to support claims of Assad's guilt and demonstrating the legality of any intervention was sufficiently low so as to permit a Gadarene march into the Syrian conflict in circumstances where military action was not a last resort.

There was a strategic case for action. The argument that the use of these weapons represented the crossing of a "red line" requiring a strong response so as to deter further chemical attacks provided a clear rationale for action that linked both moral arguments with Britain's security interests. Yet the motivations behind the proposals for airstrikes were more complex than the government was willing to acknowledge. The claim that this was solely about preventing further uses of CW was an argument borne of political expediency, a necessary ruse given widespread parliamentary opposition to further British involvement in the Syrian conflict. Ghouta occurred at a juncture where British Syria policy, pushed for several months in a more interventionist direction by a frustrated Cameron and Hague, had been rendered impotent by parliamentary opposition, as described in the previous chapter. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were therefore already primed to lean toward military options, now that these became available. Additionally, military force had an intuitive appeal because it resonated with the powerful sense of outrage many felt in witnessing images of the attacks, it symbolised taking a stand and defending "values" in response to this atrocity and it satisfied a desire to punish Assad.

The previous chapters on Britain's Syria policy showed that military intervention was simply not an option that was available to policymakers. As for the counterfactual scenario of what might have happened had the opportunity to intervene existed, we cannot know. What the Ghouta episode shows, however, is that on the one occasion that the opportunity to use military force did exist, the British government jumped at the opportunity without hesitation. In the absence of the Commons' unexpected historic veto, this would have been the second time in little over two years that the Coalition would have embarked on a form of humanitarian intervention in the Middle East, despite all the previous indications that it would be cautious and restrained in its approach to such issues. Many of the assumptions and arguments that produced this proposed intervention were consistent with previous elements of Britain's Syria policy and with the intervention in Libya. The proposals for military force retained the strong emphasis on morality and values as a determinant of action, demonstrated an ambiguous attitude toward international law and multilateral decision-making processes and placed greater stress on what were perceived to be the costs of inaction, while downplaying or ignoring the risks of deploying military force in uncertain circumstances.

Conclusion

This thesis has made an empirical contribution to our understanding of contemporary British foreign policy by carrying out the first historical analysis of the Coalition government's policy toward the conflicts in Libya and Syria, while drawing upon a range of primary sources that existing scholarship has not fully used or ignored altogether. The existing literature comprises relatively little empirical analysis of Britain's decision to intervene in Libya in 2011 and almost no analysis Britain's continued involvement in that conflict. Regarding the Syria conflict, despite extensive discussion of the implications of Parliament's vote against military action in 2013, there was almost no serious discussion of the government's policy toward that conflict. The decision to call for Assad's departure in 2011, the attempt to provide arms to the opposition beginning in early 2013 and the rationale behind the calls for military action in summer 2013 have all so far escaped serious scholarly scrutiny. Taken individually, each of the chapters in this thesis therefore helps fill a significant gap in the literature.

The existing accounts of Britain's decision to intervene in Libya have stressed the dominant role of a Prime Minister driven by moral conviction, the presence of humanitarian objectives and the memory of the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s. The evidence reviewed in Chapter Three broadly supports the fundamentals of this narrative. Cameron began contemplating military action at a relatively early stage in the crisis and he publicly advocated this option in Parliament as early as 28 February 2011, when many in the NSC were sceptical and cabinet was yet to discuss this possibility. As early as 7 March, Cameron favoured military action with or without UN approval and he was the dominant voice in the NSC pushing for intervention. For key decision-makers in the Coalition government, both those who were enthusiastic to intervene and those who were more cautious, it was their growing perception of the large scale threat to civilian life, particularly in the city of Benghazi, that moved them to act. Their collective fears of what might happen if military intervention was not forthcoming and their framing of the options before them was powerfully shaped by the memory of the Bosnian conflict and the

Srebrenica massacre. Evidence for much of this could be found in the contemporary public record but the testimony provided to the FAC's inquiry in 2015 provided much firmer support for this interpretation.

However, the conventional wisdom about this decision needs qualifying in certain respects. It is important to note that the Libyan crisis coincided with the apotheosis of the Arab Spring, and wider regional events shaped the context in which the Libyan crisis was framed, encouraging a strong response. The British role in the adoption of UN Resolution 1970, which imposed strong sanctions and referred the situation to the ICC, has generally been neglected in the existing accounts of British policy. This neglect is a mistake as the decisions taken at this stage were an important precursor to military intervention and this diplomatic action shows that Britain had adopted a policy of regime change before Cameron began advocating military options. In its efforts to secure a second resolution Britain pursued a strategy based upon the fulfilment of three criteria: regional support, clear legal basis and demonstrable need. These facts show that even if Cameron was more hawkish than other members of his government, it is wrong to suggest that he was the sole architect of British policy or that any concerns raised by other members of the government were "brushed aside" or ignored. The evidence reviewed in Chapter Three suggests that the final decision was more consensual than is generally portrayed in the existing accounts. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister does appear to have been relatively indifferent to the practical concerns about the limitations of a no-fly zone and the strain on British capabilities, issues that were raised by the Chief of Defence Staff and the Defence Secretary. Chapter Three argued that understanding the US position is important in this context because without the sudden intervention of President Obama, such concerns would have been realised on the battlefield. Finally, Chapter Three also suggested that while the primary motivation behind British intervention was the humanitarian goal of protecting civilian life, this was anchored to a strong determination to remove Gaddafi from power and facilitate a wider political transformation in Libya. The evidence reviewed in Chapter Three showed that this process of conflating the goals of regime change and civilian protection began as early as

February and that democratic regime change was therefore a goal of British policy from the beginning.

The existing accounts of the Libyan intervention have generally failed to analyse British policy beyond this point, at least in any great detail. Chapter Four filled this gap. It reinforced the above point, demonstrating that British involvement in the Libyan conflict was shaped by a several objectives. In addition to protecting civilians from Colonel's Gaddafi's forces as authorised by Resolution 1973, the British government wanted the rebel forces to prevail in the conflict and for Gaddafi and his acolytes to face total defeat and the prospect of justice in the Hague. During the first phase of the conflict, British policy struggled to break the stalemate on the ground. A series of constraints, foremost among them the compromises necessary to maintain alliance unity, ensured that the use of air power could not quickly bring the war to an end. Toward the latter stages of the conflict, as the goal of ensuring a rebel victory became the dominant concern, the government took greater risks and sanctioned actions that clearly went beyond the remit of the resolution. This included the insertion of special forces on the ground, the facilitation of violations of the arms embargo in favour of rebel forces, and the use of NATO airpower to target Gaddafi directly and to aid advancing rebel militias in their seizure of territory.

Chapter Four showed that while the decision to intervene in March may have been a last resort given the circumstances on the ground at the time, the decision to continue to use military force indefinitely was not. Drawing upon a range of sources, the evidence reviewed showed that the British government, having committed to military action, was not interested in anything less than complete victory. Even if the prospect of a negotiated solution was always unlikely, the government was not much interested in pursuing this possibility and actively undermined the efforts of others to do so. This may have arisen, in part, because the government's strategy was to encourage defections from within the regime and it was calculated peace feelers might undermine this approach. However, it was equally a consequence of the government's good versus evil framing of the conflict and the symbolic importance of a rebel victory. Chapter Four

also reviewed the evidence about the plans and assumptions for the post-conflict reconstruction period. It showed that policy-makers embraced idealistic and optimistic assumptions about the NTC and the prospects for a post-Gaddafi Libya and failed to devote the necessary resources and attention to address the potential difficulties. It further showed that, rather than blithely repeating the mistakes of Iraq, it was just as often the misapplication of what were taken to be the “lessons” of that conflict that contributed to erroneous assumptions in this area of policy.

On the face of it, the Syrian crisis presented the government with a similar dilemma to that which it had responded to in Libya. Here was another brutal dictator, crushing popular protests in favour of democracy with violence and repression. Chapter Five sought to show the full extent of the constraints British policy faced, pointing to Britain’s lack of leverage in Damascus and to divisions within the EU, the UN and the Arab League. The uniquely permissive diplomatic environment that allowed for the passage of strong resolutions against Gaddafi owed much to idiosyncratic factors that were absent in the Syrian case. Furthermore, the perception that the Western powers had abused the UN resolutions in Libya encouraged the BRICS, Russia particularly, in their suspicions of Western intentions. Finally, while Obama belatedly decided to support intervention in Libya he remained determined to avoid being dragged into the Syrian quagmire. While British ministers avoided drawing too much attention to it, without US military capabilities the debate over possible military action in Syria was purely academic. Chapter Five set out the argument that these structural factors are essential to any account of British policy.

Chapter Five also presented evidence showing that given these constraints, Britain adopted what was in fact an activist and hawkish position toward the conflict. Britain was consistent in its strong condemnation of Assad and was at the forefront of efforts to push for tough measures in both the EU and the UN. Britain was instrumental in securing multiple waves of EU sanctions and tabled three resolutions condemning Assad in the Security Council that were blocked by Russian and Chinese vetoes. It would therefore be wholly inappropriate to characterise the position of the British government as indifferent to the conflict or insufficiently robust in its determination to confront Assad. Britain openly championed democratic regime

change in Syria from as early as August 2011 and began calling for criminal accountability, somewhat inconsistently, in 2012. While supporting various mediation efforts during this period, Britain refused to retreat from the hawkish position that Assad's departure must take place before any transition. By drawing upon a detailed and systematic review of the public statements made by ministers during this period, in addition to evidence submitted to the rolling inquiries of the FAC and the Liaison Committee, the analysis showed that Britain's approach to Syria was often driven by many of the same ideas and assumptions that had shaped the intervention in Libya. Many in the government, including both the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, adopted a moral, black and white framing of the conflict, were moved by an ideological solidarity with Assad's opponents and were, in principle, sympathetic to arguments of a more interventionist variety.

As Syria descended into full-blown civil war, as the sectarian divisions became a dominant aspect of the conflict and as militant Islamists became the largest and most effective fighting force within the opposition, many Western observers began to revise their understanding of the situation, their assessment of Western interests and the appropriate policy prescriptions. This was true for the US President and for some Conservative backbenchers, who called for a more cautious and even-handed approach. Chapter Six showed that for Cameron and Hague, however, the deterioration of the conflict merely reinforced their outrage with Assad, their ideological solidarity with what they perceived to be the more moderate elements of the Syrian opposition and their conviction that such colossal human suffering necessitated increased British involvement in the conflict. Chapter Six traced how beginning in late 2012 and early 2013, Britain led the way in lifting the EU's arms embargo in the face of strong opposition both domestically and internationally. It argued that given the difficulties with pursuing this policy, it would be wrong to characterise this as a half-hearted move intended to merely broaden the options. The analysis showed that while Hague often justified the policy in the language of pragmatism, his commitment to support the Syrian opposition, despite the risks it entailed and the opposition the government was facing, is testament to the strength of the moral conviction

that drove this approach. Cameron and Hague both continued to see the conflict and their obligations primarily in ethical terms and viewed the existing set of policies not only as practically insufficient but as morally indefensible. Chapter Six also presented evidence of a lesser known instance of parliamentary obstructionism, showing how the House of Commons exercised a de facto veto over the government's attempt to arm the opposition following the lifting of the EU's arms embargo in July 2013.

The large-scale use of chemical weapons in Damascus in August 2013 changed the calculus in the White House, with President Obama quickly proposing air strikes against the Assad regime. The key figures in the British government, including Cameron, Hague and Clegg, enthusiastically embraced the opportunity for military action but the House of Commons exercised an historic veto. Whereas the existing literature has focused on explaining the reasons behind this defeat and its longer-term implications for British foreign policy, Chapter Seven investigated the British reaction to Ghouta from a different angle. Although this chapter had to draw upon a more restricted range of sources it argued that, nonetheless, this particular episode reveals more about the Coalition government's willingness to use force. It argued that although the government saw military force as a means of upholding international rules against the use of CW and deterring Assad from subsequent violations of these norms, British policy was not limited to this objective alone. This chapter argued that this episode should be located in the wider context of British Syria policy and the government's ongoing failure to acquire any leverage over the situation. Furthermore, participation in air strikes had an intuitive appeal because of its ability to symbolise British hostility toward Assad and a willingness to take strong action in the name of values. Finally, Chapter Seven also observed how the government committed to a military response very quickly, when the legality of any action was ambiguous at best, the intelligence surrounding events on the ground was still emerging and the practical consequences of air strikes were not fully considered. Overall, the government's response to the Ghouta atrocity showed that the resort to military options in the minds of key policy-makers was automatic and reflexive, not a carefully considered last resort.

When viewed collectively, each chapter feeds into a wider argument about the assumptions and ideas that shaped the use of force during the period reviewed in this thesis. Much of the literature on the foreign policy of the Coalition government has focused on the idea of ‘‘liberal conservatism’’ and has assessed British policy toward the Arab Spring and the Libyan intervention in reference to this set of ideas. Some have seen intervention in Libya as consistent with this set of ideas and while not marking a return to the approach of the Major years, as typical of more pragmatic tradition of British foreign policy,¹⁰⁷⁸ or else have chosen to highlight the ways in which the Libya intervention and the approach of the Coalition differs from that associated with the New Labour period.¹⁰⁷⁹ Other have chosen instead to note the similarities between the approach of Cameron’s government and those of the Blair years, suggesting it retained the key elements of the ‘‘liberal interventionist’’ approach despite promises to the contrary.¹⁰⁸⁰ The argument developed in the thesis has supported the second interpretation, but has drawn on a much broader range of evidence and a more detailed level of analysis.

The precursor to this argument was sketched out in Chapter Two. It showed that within the existing literature, terms such a ‘‘pragmatism’’ and ‘‘liberal interventionism’’ were commonly used to describe the ideas that shaped British foreign policy but were rarely adequately defined. This chapter helped develop a more robust conceptualisation of these two important analytical categories. It argued that while pragmatism is often depicted by its adherents as non-ideological, it represented a theoretically distinct approach to British foreign policy that was consequentialist in its mode of reasoning, anchored to a conservative world-view and philosophy and possessing a close overlap with *realpolitik*. It argued that liberal interventionism was a distinctive approach within the wider tradition of liberal or idealist foreign policy thinking. This approach was idealistic, moralistic and willing to advocate force not simply for

¹⁰⁷⁸ Daddow and Schnapper, ‘‘Liberal Intervention,’’ Daddow, ‘‘Constructing a ‘Great’ Role,’’ 309-312; Honeyman, ‘‘From Liberal Interventionism.’’

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ralph, ‘‘The Liberal State,’’; Daddow and Gaskarth, ‘‘From Value Protection,’’ 149-150.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Beech and Munce, ‘‘Place of Human Rights,’’; Beech and Oliver, ‘‘Humanitarian Intervention,’’; Oliver, ‘‘Interventionism by Design’’; Vickers, ‘‘Foreign Policy,’’ 227-233; Clarke, ‘‘Policy-Making Process,’’ 7-8; Garnett, Mabon and Smith, *British Foreign Policy*, 309-319; Sanders and Houghton, *Losing An Empire*, 189-190.

preventing atrocities in other states, but for the fulfilment of more substantive liberal goals such as democratic regime change. It located the emergence of this approach within a series of wider changes, such as the ending of the Cold War, globalization, new understandings of humanitarianism and the experience and memory of atrocities in the Yugoslav civil wars. These ideas provided a richer historical and conceptual backdrop for locating the emergence of “liberal conservatism,” the vaguely formulated approach outlined by Cameron and Hague from 2006 onwards.

Chapter Two provided a more comprehensive and up to date definitional discussion than can be found in the existing literature, but its primary purpose was to prepare the ground for the central empirical claim that emerges from this research. The research in the subsequent chapters revealed a multitude of issues that are relevant to a proper understanding of the topics under scrutiny, but a recurrent theme was the notion that in its response to both Libya and Syria, the Coalition government exhibited many of the key elements of the liberal interventionist approach. To reiterate, the value of this argument is not in labelling events after the fact, but in demonstrating the presence of these ideas in the minds and actions of key decision-makers and their central importance in accounting for and explaining the direction of British policy. This interpretation was not conceived in order to demonstrate the relevance and validity of a deductive model, but instead emerged from a source-oriented methodology. The importance of these ideas and their role in explaining British policy was not decided in advance but emerged from the documents that were surveyed and evaluated in the conduct of this research.

The first component of this liberal interventionism was its idealism, its universalism and its ideological self-confidence. The British response to the crises in both Libya and Syria was grounded in an idealistic world-view and key individuals within the British government viewed the crises through the lens of this idealism. The Arab Spring was seen as a vindication of “universal” values, as evidence of the teleological march of human progress and as representing a Manichean battle between freedom and tyranny. This shaped the perception of both conflicts. Regardless of whether this framing was true or false, it undoubtedly provided a

simplified interpretation of events, encouraged a tendency to overlook the more local and idiosyncratic dimensions to the conflicts and made strong and hawkish shows of support for the rebel side seem intuitively appealing. It raised the stakes symbolically speaking, elevating the conflicts beyond their more specific, immediate and local consequences toward a more abstract battleground in which values such as freedom and democracy, and Britain's role in defending them, would be played out. Throughout the conflicts, the British government showed a persistent optimism and ideological confidence, one that made sense in the heady days of spring 2011 but had to reckon with a growing body of evidence suggesting a more complex picture was emerging on the ground from summer of 2011 onwards. While some in the government might have urged caution, neither Cameron nor Hague seemed to dim their sense of optimism and their faith in the spirit of the Arab Spring, and this optimism shaped their assessment of the policy options before them, priming them to take risks that others might have felt reckless. This optimism and idealism, for example, was borne out in the naivety of some of the government's post-conflict planning assumptions in Libya and its assumptions about the relative risks of inserting more arms into the Syrian conflict in the summer of 2013.

The second key feature of the liberal interventionist approach, its level of ambition and its instinctive faith in the utility and legitimacy of military force, was also present. In both Libya and Syria, the British government pursued a policy of democratic regime change, alongside the pursuit of international justice. These were certainly ambitious objectives and while the attitude toward their implementation may have appeared more modest, these goals were not fundamentally unlike those which were at the heart of the neoconservative project that was pursued in the early 2000s. The idea that air power alone could remove from power the Gaddafi dictatorship and that a hastily prepared, light footprint civilian intervention could ensure a transition to a secular, democratic state in a country with a recent history of radical Islamist insurgency and no experience of democratic institutions was a remarkable leap of faith. In Syria, it might be argued that the objectives were even more ambitious. Britain ultimately advocated much the same set of policies and goals that it had done in Libya, albeit without the

military force with which to bring them about. When finally presented with the opportunity to deploy military force in August 2013, the speed with which the government embraced this opportunity betrayed a lack of prudence and reflexive appetite for military intervention. It is little surprise that the relationship between the politicians and the country's senior military adviser was not an entirely straight forward one during these years.

Chapter Two also highlighted both the central role given to ethical considerations in the liberal interventionist approach and the specific type of ethical reasoning that it generally favours.

Ethical considerations were at the centre of British policy in both Libya and Syria. Members of the Coalition government saw Libya primarily as a moral dilemma, much in the same way that Blair had conceived the Kosovo crisis a decade earlier. In the language they used at the time and in the testimony they later provided to the FAC inquiry, those in government emphasised ethical considerations above other matters in explaining, rationalizing and justifying the decision to intervene. A strong sense of moral outrage underpinned the willingness to continue with military action in support of the rebel cause and a reluctance to seriously consider the possibility of a negotiated solution. The framing of the conflict and Britain's role within it continued to emphasise the importance of values, particularly the notion of fighting for "freedom." In Syria Britain had to grapple with a greater set of constraints, but the public insistence on regime change was driven above all by a strong moral conviction that Assad ought to be removed from power and the decision to move toward arming the opposition in late 2012 was driven by an equally powerful conviction that the existing set of policies were morally redundant in the face of such large-scale suffering. A similar sense of moral outrage motivated the desire for military action in response to the Ghouta attacks, which was seen as a means of meting out appropriate justice to the perpetrators of the atrocities and drawing a symbolic line over what was morally permissible in conflict. In the main, British objectives could be loosely described as "humanitarian" but the policy choices were usually less a calculated attempt to pursue these and more often the result of an intuitive sense of right and wrong.

The approach of the coalition was also consistent with the liberal interventionist conception of national interest. Chapter Two suggested that from a liberal interventionist perspective, national interest plays less of a central role in general and particularly when determining if and when intervention is necessary and justified. Faced with the strategic shock of the Arab Spring, national interest was an indeterminate calculus and its logic could be utilised in favour of almost any set of policy options. The British response to Libya and Syria was consistent with this. As stressed above, it was moral arguments rather than strategic calculations that dominating the minds of the key decision makers. National interest featured in debates often as a post-hoc justification or in contexts where its invocation was necessary to persuade sceptical Conservative backbenchers. Secondly, it was suggested that the liberal interventionist conception of national interest is both malleable and expansive, orienting its strategic compass in the wake of what it perceives to be the unique challenges arising from contemporary globalization and fusing interests and values together. This was borne out in the arguments that leading members of the government presented for supporting the Arab Spring. While many in the US administration, including the President himself, clung to a more traditional view of national interest and saw this as a basis for a cautious, non-interventionist stance, the British government concluded that as the status quo could no longer provide the stability desired, it was necessary to fully support the forces for change, either to encourage the process of radical reform or, in the last resort, actively shape the revolutionary tide.

It would be wrong to say that the Coalition government openly flouted international law or eschewed multilateral diplomacy. One key difference from the New Labour period was the persistent emphasis it placed on ensuring regional support for its approach. In the build up to the intervention in Libya and during the early months of that campaign, the government attached greater importance to maintaining the legitimacy of its action through a multilateral approach. The government also sought to avoid the impression it was openly acting in contravention of international law and the Attorney General was a near permanent presence on the NSC. In responding to the crisis in Syria, the government showed a consistent preference

for working through multilateral channels, focusing its efforts on securing a Security Council resolution and only moving toward serious consideration of more high risk options when this approach was shown to have failed completely toward the end of July 2012. In many instances, the preference for multilateralism and for acting consistently with international law set constraints on British action that left policymakers frustrated. However, it is difficult to assess whether this was reflective of a principled commitment to international law and multilateral diplomacy, as is typical of classical liberal approaches to foreign policy, and how much was imposed out of necessity due to Britain's diminished status, paltry leverage and the reputational damage caused by Iraq.

In other respects, the relationship between British policy and international law was quite ambiguous. The official British position was that UN support was desirable, not essential. In the build up to the Libya intervention, Cameron was reported to have informed his cabinet as early as 7 March that he favoured military action with or without UN approval. From the outset of the campaign, the military actions taken by Britain and its allies violated the spirit of 1973 and over time the government was more and more willing to stray beyond the boundaries of the UN resolutions in its hunt for Gaddafi. In Syria, the persistent and hawkish insistence on regime change cut away at the possibility of international agreement, even while Britain made the acquisition of a UN resolution the centrepiece of its policy. Following the collapse of the Annan plan, Britain abandoned its more multilateral strategy, pursuing the lifting of the arms embargo with increasing vigour, in opposition to the majority of EU members. As soon as Ghouta provided the opportunity for military action, the government rushed ahead regardless of the absence of UN approval, asserting that its unilaterally determined “doctrine of humanitarian intervention” provided a sufficient case for war. Much of this is consistent with liberal interventionism, which treats international law as an obstacle to be navigated around more than a principle to be upheld.

The final core element of the liberal interventionist philosophy sketched in Chapter Two was its reliance on a negative argument and its reverence for the historical lessons of the Bosnian

conflict and the memory of Srebrenica. This type of logic and the historical inheritance upon which it draws was central to Britain's decision to intervene in Libya but its role in the development of British Syria policy was not insignificant. Whether reluctantly as in the case of Fox and Richards, or enthusiastically as in the case of Cameron, policymakers drew upon their shared memory of the Bosnian conflict and the "lesson" they took from the Srebrenica massacre. From this perspective, non-intervention was simply not a defensible option. The Bosnian analogy was less a prominent feature in the debates over Syria but it was a near identical logic that was drawn upon in defence of the government's efforts to amend and lift the EU's arms embargo in early 2013 and again when faced with the horrors of Ghouta in August of that year. Hague, Cameron and Burt consistently made the case for intervention via proxy, less by stressing the actual benefits and advantages of this option but more by pointing to the inadequacy of continuing with the existing set of policies and by framing these as a form of inaction and worse, moral indifference. Similarly, in making the case for military action in response to the chemical attacks, Cameron, Clegg and Hague portrayed any non-military response as "standing idly by" and they pointed to the negative consequences of inaction as a powerful argument for a strong response. In sum, the evidence drawn upon in this thesis reflects a pattern, one that is consistent with the assumptions and ideas outlined in Chapter Two and largely inconsistent with the rhetoric of "liberal conservatism" and the claim made by the Prime Minister that he was sceptical and practical in his advocacy of intervention and regime change in Libya. The Arab Spring clearly brought to the fore the hawkish and idealistic instincts of many key figures in the Coalition government and showed that they were very much the heirs to Blair.

A possible counter-argument might point to the signs of pragmatism in British policy. The research presented in this thesis has not sought to hide the fact that there were elements of pragmatism in the British response. The three criteria, particularly the calls for regional support, can be read as a pragmatic adjustment to the lessons of Iraq. The effort made to sustain the legitimacy of the operation, by minimising civilian casualties, retaining Arab support and

avoiding *openly* transgressing the UN mandate, were all pragmatic calculations. In Syria, the initial emphasis on multilateral approaches was similarly reflective of practical assessments of what was realistic and it was only when policy-makers became convinced that the diplomacy-first option had reached a cul-de-sac that they began considering more high risk and unilateral options. There are three drawbacks to this interpretation. Firstly, the objectives that were shaping British policy were idealistic and ambitious to the point of being decidedly impractical, particularly in the case of Syria. Secondly, while the government sometimes used the language of scepticism and practicability to explain and justify its approach, the overall thrust of official rhetoric emphasised the role of values in guiding policy and an idealistic forecast about the Arab Spring. Finally, no set of policies will consistently adhere to any single set of philosophical assumptions. Even the most committed champion of liberal interventionism will on occasion indulge in the practice of *realpolitik*.

However, this argument about inconsistency cannot be so easily set aside. If there is a major weakness or flaw in this argument, it is likely to stem less from any facts about the nature of Britain's approach to Libya and Syria, but instead from reflection on British policy toward other countries and issues. For example, on whether to vote on upgrading Palestine's diplomatic status at the UN in late 2012, Hague justified Britain's unwillingness to support this by telling Parliament that, "in international diplomacy, when our heart and our head pull in different directions, we have to give precedence to the considerations of our head."¹⁰⁸¹ Whether this position is right or wrong, it was a quintessentially conservative and realist position to take, one profoundly at odds with the ideas and values that shaped the approach toward Libya and Syria and, indeed, one at odds with the version of liberal interventionism outlined above. There is no easy or simple way of overcoming this objection, but a few counterpoints are worth considering. Firstly, the same arguments about inconsistency made above would apply here also. It is ironic that Tony Blair, the most illustrious champion of liberal intervention, was the architect of Britain's rapprochement with Gaddafi in 2004, but this single episode does not

¹⁰⁸¹ HC Deb, 20/11/2012, cc. 451-452.

make the Labour leader a realist in sheep's clothing. Secondly, one cannot jump to quick conclusions derived from other, seemingly incongruent aspects of British foreign policy, without first carrying out a detailed empirical examination of those aspects, such that does not currently exist. It is better to recognise that some inconsistency appears to exist and that its proper investigation may ultimately jeopardise *any* interpretation which tends toward greater levels of generalization. However, that remains an implication for future research and its premature advancement would be unhelpful to both sides of the debate.

The final weakness that requires open acknowledgment is the nature of the sources and their necessary limitations. Without access to the internal government records, our understanding of the detailed discussions that were taking place behind the scenes is likely to be sometimes superficial and sometimes speculative. The full documentary record will no doubt be able to add greater in-depth understanding of the position of various Whitehall departments; of the intelligence picture; of discussions in the NSC and of internal divisions. It also remains the case that, Richards aside, most of the key individuals are yet to release their memoirs and autobiographies, accounts that will shed further light on the events analysed in the preceding chapters.¹⁰⁸² The future availability of these sources will no doubt encourage revisions, both minor and major, to some of the arguments advanced in preceding chapters. Furthermore, a reliance on parliamentary debates and other sources that were produced for public consumption might lend itself to an interpretation that privileges the public presentation of policy.

These drawbacks should not be overstated. Most of these limitations are not unique to this work and apply with equal force to any work of contemporary history. Although access to the full government record might provide grounds for refinement, it is unlikely to force a fundamental change in the narrative or the interpretation being advanced here. As Richard Vinen has suggested, when writing about the Thatcher era, we should be “sceptical about the idea that there is some pot of gold at the end of the archival rainbow.”¹⁰⁸³ Such scepticism seems even

¹⁰⁸² At the time of writing, Cameron's memoirs are about to be released.

¹⁰⁸³ Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 313.

more appropriate when writing about the Coalition government, which operated in a more transparent political environment and whose foreign policy was subjected to far greater levels of parliamentary scrutiny, probably, than any of its predecessors. The increased reliance on the parliamentary record is also an appropriate reflection of changes in the making of foreign policy, such as the increased importance of domestic opinion and the media. The research in this thesis has taken advantage of a far broader range of sources than has informed many of the articles and books currently written on British foreign policy and it therefore represents a first step in the direction of more fully source-based accounts and, hopefully, something on which future scholars can build.

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Official Announcements

This category includes press releases, official statements, government news stories, transcripts of press conferences and transcripts of interviews. The government website lists these under the category “Announcements.”

The majority of the sources listed in this section are accessible via the government website, <https://www.gov.uk/search/news-and-communications>. In the course of this research, I have consulted every “announcement” containing the word “Libya” between May 2009 and October 2011 and every “announcement” containing the word “Syria” between May 2009 and August 2013. Below is a list of only those sources directly cited in the thesis. The majority of the sources in this section were produced by either the Prime Minister’s Office, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. However, similar sources from foreign governments and international organizations that have been cited in the thesis are also listed here.

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