

Deserting Libya: The Rhetoric of British Foreign Policy

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In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

If you care to read the British Government's [official advice to potential or actual visitors to Libya](#), which as at 26th September, 2015 is "Still Current"; you will find the following bleak message:

Latest update: Summary - intense fighting continues in Benghazi, Sirte, Darnah and parts of southern Libya; the situation remains dangerous throughout the country.

More specifically the grim picture painted by the Foreign Office continues as follows:

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advise against all travel to Libya due to the ongoing fighting, threat of terrorist attacks and kidnap against foreigners (including from ISIL-affiliated extremists), and a dangerous security situation throughout the country.

British nationals still in Libya are strongly urged to leave immediately by commercial means. The British Embassy in Tripoli has temporarily closed, and is unable to provide consular assistance.

There is a high threat from terrorism. There have been a number of attacks and threats against westerners, western interests and symbolic targets throughout Libya. ISIL-affiliated groups have stated an intention to target foreigners. There is clear evidence that groups within Libya have both the intent and capability to carry out kidnappings and are specifically targeting foreign nationals.



The advice goes on with similar warnings regarding the high risk of kidnapping, of car bombs and heavy fighting in residential areas of Benghazi and elsewhere: on 27th July “a British diplomatic convoy was subject to an attempted car-jacking on the road between Tripoli and the Ras-al Jadir border crossing with Tunisia. Like many other parts of Libya, roads in this area are vulnerable to criminal gangs”. The official advice confesses that the fighting includes the involvement of major, well-known international middle-eastern extremist jihadi groups, and acknowledges, as if at last to underscore the FCO’s own remote detachment and complete ignorance: “it’s unclear in some areas which faction has control.”

Meanwhile we have a flow of refugees, gathering from across the Middle East’s or Africa’s worst war-torn or anarchic states, circuitously moving in an arc from East or South before consolidating through Libya, which discreetly funnels them from frying-pan to fire; into the hands of the operatives of the few non-hydrocarbon international trades (along with gun-running) Libya now specialises in: people-smuggling to Europe. The journey, like any war-zone taken over by criminals, has its own rate of morbid attrition for all who venture to take their chance of surviving the Mediterranean crossing or the inhumanity of the smugglers; and yet so nightmarish (we can only imagine), is the road the refugees have traversed to reach this Dantean Inferno in Libya, or so desperate their predicament; on they come, regardless. The fall of Gaddafi has brought together on the edge of Europe the worst of all possible worlds, and opened the flood-gates to exacerbate the greatest human refugee migration since World War II, and direct it toward Europe.

How did this happen? Let us begin with an examination of David Cameron’s view of the British contribution in 2011 to Gaddafi’s momentous fall in Libya, and the triumph Cameron’s government had achieved in leading the regime-change project. A quite clear statement of critical factors may be found by happenstance in the bold assertions Cameron allowed himself on BBC Radio 4, 2nd September, 2011 promoting the objectives the Libyan rebels (the National Transitional Council) had achieved, and which Cameron had directly backed with military air-strikes (and which RUSI described as “crucial air support”), simultaneously cementing Britain’s role in regime-change by the PM making bullish claims for the Libyan revolution’s success and prospects, while co-chairing a major international

summit in Paris to build support for the Libyan regime that replaced Gaddafi. Supported by Britain, the new Libyan regime promised the Paris summit a speedy transition to democracy and early elections in Libya (the elections were held, but the rest proved completely illusory).

All of this British policy rhetoric, we should remember, was offered to the British people as triumphant and decisive, permanent proof of success, at a time when the disastrous example of Iraq was still raw in the public memory, even in the FCO; and both the military and political policy in Afghanistan was slowly descending into the incomprehensible political enigma it remains to this day.

Cameron said this to the British people on 2nd September, 2011 in support of the overthrow of Gaddafi, and as a scornful rebuff to the critics:

A lot of armchair generals who said you couldn't do it without an aircraft carrier, they were wrong. A lot of people who said Tripoli is completely different to Benghazi, the two don't get on, they were wrong. People who said this is all going to be an enormous swamp of Islamists and extremists, they were wrong. People who said we were going to run out of munitions, they were wrong. (Source: International Business Times report of the PM's 2nd September, 2011 statement)

This much remains true: they didn't run out of munitions, and the Libyan militias, extremists, gangsters, jihadists and terrorists haven't run out of munitions ever since. Indeed it is now claimed that Libya is a significant source of armaments supply in this unstable area of the world, reaching as far as Mali or Syria.

The Prime Minister, however loftily claimed that Tripoli was "getting itself back together again in relatively good order" and the new regime (the National Transitional Council) was "rapidly mending" Libya. He went on:

If we have the opportunity to do the right thing and you can see that what you are about to do is achievable and doable, then there's a very strong case for going ahead, and that was my view about Libya. It was something we ought to do and it was something we were able to do.

He also claimed that the revolution was in the UK National Interest, presented the British intervention as a "moral imperative" (now given a grand title in diplomacy, 'Responsibility to Protect' - R2P); with the rebel success inflated to a point that it would allow continuation of the 'Arab Spring': but in a moment that perhaps establishes Cameron's authentic place in the history of British foreign policy as the most ill-judged PM since Anthony Eden; he suggested that Britain remained a "full-spectrum player" (whatever that means).

More alarmingly Cameron claimed there were "many similarities" between Libya and Syria, presumably implying that he would now wish to apply his uncanny Napoleonic talent for both intervention and for military strategy and tactics in Syria; and of course we have subsequently seen references to drone and air strikes in Syria, but no claims to quick victories, or indeed anything that looks like victory - or even a clear and distinct idea of the identity of the enemy in this labyrinthine myriad of over-lapping, interconnected, warring parties that provide a bewildering tapestry of changing alliances, dubious relationships,

contradictory militias, sects, tribes, jihadists, ideologists that we are either 'fighting', or perhaps allied with, against some other equally uncertain 'enemy' who was last year's ally, based on who knows what unreliable or shifting intelligence (or even identify who our friends are?); in a non-war that Parliament has not approved.

Notice that Cameron cannot claim now (2015) that nobody in 2011 saw the deep flaws in his Libyan regime-change campaign at the time; his case openly rested on the decisiveness and finality of the British-backed rebel triumph in producing regime-change and the promise of stability, of final victory and even democracy it ensured. All of this failed spectacularly. Yet, as Cameron's 2nd September statement demonstrates, he could not even stop there; and in the moment of irresistible hubris to which he wretchedly succumbed, deliberately resorted to florid rhetorical devices to emphasise his heavy scorn (a derivation of symplote: here repetition of 'people' and 'they were wrong' - see quotation above), the PM dismissed with excessive relish the many dire and acutely prophetic warnings he had been given that his action would at best only produce chaos in Libya, and open the Mediterranean (and therefore both friendly North African states like Tunisia, to say nothing of Europe itself) to a variety of serious threats and refugee problems for which no single country, nor even the EU, has subsequently proved itself adequately equipped to resolve, or even face.

I do not claim to be an expert on Libya. There are many established sources for evidence of the current state of Libya (and I here carefully restrict myself narrowly to offering only those likely to be favourable to the UK, or at least not likely to be dismissed by UK Government apologists) although there are few Western sources currently operating within Libya, for it is so dangerous for correspondents, as the travel advice reveals.

Such sources of evidence include the Middle East Monitor (Samira Shackle, 5th August, 2014 tellingly titled a paper "Libya's descent into anarchy" and went on to describe the country as "in a state of civil war; violence between rival militias is out of control; arms proliferate; and the rule of law and order is practically non-existent"); the Royal United Services Institute [RUSI] (which has been cautiously but very persistently critical of UK policy, notably of the R2P formula); the Quilliam Foundation (which has doggedly supported UK action as late as 2014, but Noman Benotman, in a briefing paper on 25th March, 2014 at the same time described Libya as facing "a disastrous lack of security and law and order", and acknowledged a "total failure in Libya's defence and security sectors, both of which are essential for governments to exercise their power"); or Chatham House (a supporter of UK policy as late as 2012 but which now seems curiously [?] quieter and quieter on Libya briefings since then); or best of all simply read the British Government's Travel Advice to Libya, under the sub-heading "Security", as I have done and there discover the stark message of black failure presented by the Government in its own words, four years after Cameron claimed to have delivered secure success - that he was right; ironically, for the British people to read now, absorb and whatever they do - in all costs avoid Libya.

It seems clear that the Libyan security position in 2015 is no better than 2014, and indeed (certainly from a UK policy perspective), much worse. None of the sources listed above now offer convincing evidence that Libya may be described as anything other than a failed state, war-torn, divided, reduced to civil war, anarchistic and overwhelmed by tribal factionalism, jihadists and criminals. The Libyan government writ does not run, and it appears it was the collapse of security and order in Libya that opened the route through the porous Libyan border for terrorists to mount their appalling attack on foreign tourists (principally from the UK) in Tunisia earlier this year. What alone surprises, is the relative lack of detailed attention that Libya (and Britain's catastrophic intervention) has received from public 'expert' opinion

and think-tanks since 2011, in the middle of all the ‘hand-wringing’ over the Middle East, given the nature of the current crisis and the problems for Europe that Libya presents.

All I have done here is to present the British Government’s own assessment (pre-and-post the Coalition, for Government policy has remained apparently unchanged, like the PM responsible for the policy), principally in the words of the Government or the PM, and to contrast this with the established, and generally undisputed facts, again drawn largely from Government or uncontentious sources.

The picture is no better the closer we look at the unfolding policy catastrophe, from beginning to end, that was managed as a joint-Western military-operation-of-the-willing in 2011 (including France and a notably reluctant US), but led by David Cameron; and not forgetting William Hague, who paid for his part in the blunder by being sacked. Be in no doubt: Libya was a major British blunder, led by two men (David Cameron and William Hague) who were, frankly out of their depth and far beyond their manifestly limited competence. For the avoidance of doubt my case here is not a defence of the brutal Gaddafi regime; it is an examination of an obvious British political foreign policy disaster in 2010-11 (by no means the first in our long and very chequered history in the region) that has had appalling consequences not only in Libya, but extending far beyond its borders, and affecting people throughout a widening region of the world, and in almost unimaginable numbers.

I make no claims to solve the world’s problems (and I hold that some problems cannot be solved), nor do I claim that Gaddafi was not a tyrant (only that Britain is not capable of fixing Libya – it hasn’t done so; and worse, it has effectively walked away from the mess it facilitated so ably in doing so much to remove him), but I would prefer if Britain did not make the world both a worse and more dangerous place by pursuing interventionist policies that are quite obviously both beyond its capacities and transparently doomed; and I make that claim without relying on hindsight.

Bella Caledonia published an article titled [‘Walking Away: the Formation of British Foreign Policy’](#) on 24th February, 2015: I attempted very carefully only to use Government sources or sources/evidence that could scarcely be challenged by Government, in order to explore the failure and self-delusion of British Foreign Policy in Libya. I believe the Government’s position on Libya was annihilated by the swiftness and the scale of the catastrophe it recklessly invited upon its botched policy; and not least by the fact that the clear and manifest opposition of wiser and more experienced judgement (or simple attention to obvious facts and bitterly earned experience) was ignored by irresponsible and too easily influenced British politicians who quite clearly lacked either judgement or experience.

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