

UK parliamentary report criticises Libya war but conceals its geo-strategic aims

Jean Shaoul

21 September 2016

Following a year of deliberations, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee published its report on Britain's military assault, alongside France and the US, on Libya in 2011.

It broadly followed the line of the Chilcot report, published a few months ago, into the Iraq war, although it did not have access to internal papers. The committee interviewed senior ministers at the time, former Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chief of Defence Staff Lord Richards and diplomatic staff. David Cameron, who headed the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government at the time of the invasion, refused to give evidence. He announced that he was resigning his parliamentary seat just two days before the report was published.

The committee was unable to travel to Libya to interview witnesses due to the dangerous security situation.

The report agreed with the assessment of US President Barack Obama, who according to the *Atlantic* magazine described the intervention as "a shit show." It makes damning criticisms of the Cameron government for:

- * Falsely claiming without any evidence that Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was about to carry out a massacre of genocidal proportions against protesters in Benghazi.

- * Rushing into a military intervention without first pursuing other options, including sanctions, an arms embargo, diplomacy or Tony Blair's close links with the Gaddafi regime.

- * Failing to understand how Libya's system of government and society worked.

- * Pursuing "an opportunistic policy of regime change," despite telling parliament in March 2011 that the objective of the intervention was not regime change. One month later, Cameron signed a joint letter with the French and US presidents that set out their aim to pursue "a future without Gaddafi."

- * Supporting rebels among whom Islamist groups were known to be embedded.

- * Failing to develop "a strategy to support and shape post-Gaddafi Libya."

The report also criticises the UK's current role in Libya for its apparent contradictions.

The government is, without parliamentary approval, deploying SAS troops to support the new Government of National Accord and battle Islamic State (ISIS) in the northwestern city of Misrata. At the same time, the Royal Air Force is supporting rival forces led by General Khalifa Haftar, a CIA asset airlifted by the Americans back into Benghazi during the 2011 war. His forces have been moving slowly west from Benghazi toward the ISIS stronghold of Sirte, after seizing control of 14 oil fields along the way from the forces of Ibrahim Jadhnan and the Petroleum Facilities' Guards (PFG), which had sought autonomy for the east and attempted to sell oil independently of the government in Tripoli. In addition, the Royal Navy is patrolling the Libyan coast to combat weapons shipments.

It is widely anticipated that the Haftar and Misrata forces, both vying for position as the Western puppet ruler in the country, may end up battling each other rather than ISIS. Such a conflicted policy can only lead to the de facto partition of yet another country in the Middle East and North Africa.

The committee concluded that, like the Iraq war, which supposedly rested on Blair's erroneous claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the result was a foreign policy disaster for which Cameron as prime minister bore full responsibility. It noted that the consequences were "political and economic collapse, inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare, humanitarian and migrant crises, widespread human rights violations, the spread of Gaddafi regime weapons across the region and the growth of [the Islamic State group] in North Africa."

From March to October 2011, an estimated 20,000 people were killed in the war, which plunged the Libyan people into a humanitarian catastrophe that continues to this day. Ever since the toppling of Gaddafi, the fighting between hundreds of militias for control of Libya's rich resources has led to the flight of 2 million people, one third of the pre-war population, to Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere, and the internal

displacement of hundreds of thousands.

The report's bitter recriminations against Cameron, as well as its lauding of Blair's links with Gaddafi's son and heir apparent, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who now faces charges at the International Criminal Court at the Hague, point to anger and frustration of layers within ruling circles, including among the military and corporate bosses. They have concluded that the UK sacrificed the oil explorations concessions it won after Blair brought Libya in from the cold in 1999 as well as inward investment in London and got nothing in return.

The committee's charges of lying to parliament and flouting international law are war crimes, for which Cameron should face charges. But while blaming Cameron, there is no suggestion that he or his government should be held culpable as it would expose the support his war policy had in the political and financial establishment—with only 13 MPs voting against the war—as well as the media.

To this end, the report conceals the broader geo-political objectives of the war and the divisions this opened up between the major powers.

The NATO-led war on the Gaddafi regime came in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring. It was, following the US-dominated war against Iraq, an occasion where rival imperialist powers sought to stake their claim to domination of oil-rich North Africa and the Middle East.

US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks dating from 2007 showed how the US, like Britain under Blair, had pursued a policy of normalisation with the Gaddafi regime in a bid to secure access to Libya's resources. But Washington became increasingly frustrated at what it called "Libyan resource nationalism" and warned Gaddafi in 2009 that "putting pressure on US companies 'crossed a red line'."

With Russia and China securing relations with Libya, tensions also mounted between the US, France, Italy and the UK.

The US began discussing regime change in Libya as early as 2008. But the first moves in this direction were made by France and the UK—with Italy following on, before the US did the same. Having done so, it was the US with superior firepower that soon re-established a central role in the war.

As a result, the US was the only power to benefit in any significant way from the Libyan war. Immediately after Gaddafi's lynching, Washington announced it was sending troops to four more African countries—the Central African Republic, Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The following year, AFRICOM, the US military's African command, carried out 14 major joint military exercises in African countries, impossible without Gaddafi's ouster. Because of Gaddafi's influence in the African Union (AU), the US was unable to find a

headquarters for AFRICOM in Africa and had to base it in Stuttgart, Germany. Now the AU is being lined up to carry out Washington's colonial ventures, as its forces are integrated with those of AFRICOM.

The war nevertheless proved on balance to be a disaster, helping to destabilise the entire region and contributing massively to the escalating refugee crisis. Having turned Libya into the model of a "failed state" with its first intervention, the Obama administration now wants to launch a second incursion in order to consolidate some kind of neo-colonial regime via the Government of National Accord, which has so far been unable to take up the reins of power.

One of the more overt political consequences of the Libyan debacle has been the eruption of open disputes between the US and its nominal European allies, especially the UK. In March of this year, Obama expressed his aggravation with "free riders" among world leaders who call for international action but do not commit sufficient military resources. The UK and France, he said, had failed to stop post-war Libya from "becoming a mess."

A unilateral US military policy in Libya was not "at the core of US interests," but the European powers had showed "an unwillingness to put any skin in the game. ..."

Cameron, he complained, became "distracted by a range of other things," allowing French President Nicolas Sarkozy to "trumpet the flights he was taking in the air campaign, despite the fact that we had wiped out all the air defences and essentially set up the entire infrastructure".

Obama's criticisms were, of course, self-serving. But they have clearly fed into the criticisms now made by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of Cameron's Libya war record. The committee's findings thus reflect the wide ranging considerations now under way as to how British imperialism can reverse the setbacks it has suffered, especially under conditions where the US is demanding greater military spending and loyalty to US dictates from the UK following the Brexit referendum vote.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact