



# Select Committee on the European Union

## External Affairs Sub-Committee

### Corrected oral evidence: Operation Sophia

Thursday 30 March 2017

10.05 am

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Members present: Baroness Verma (The Chairman); Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top; Lord Dubs; Lord Horam; Earl of Oxford and Asquith; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Suttie; Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 12

### Witness

I: Joseph Walker-Cousins, Senior Fellow, the Institute for Statecraft.

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## Examination of witness

Joseph Walker-Cousins.

Q1 **The Chairman:** Good morning. I apologise for my horrible voice; I have a cold.

This hearing is in public. A transcript of the evidence session will be sent to you. If there are any corrections to be made, please feel free to make them and send them back to us. Your short biography was circulated to the Committee. The Committee will ask questions that were sent to you, but Members are free to ask supplementaries or any questions that come to mind while they are listening to what you have to say. We are extremely grateful to you for taking time out. This will be a very important session for us.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk to you.

**The Chairman:** To set the scene, it would be useful if you would give us an update on the security situation in Libya and the prospects for the Libyan Government of National Accord reaching an agreement with the House of Representatives and General Haftar.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** The security situation is very patchy. We are probably all aware that large swathes of the country are pretty much settled and life is going on as normal—the new normal for many Libyans—but other areas are deeply contested. Those areas are along well-set tribal fault lines, and there are flashpoints among the various competing powers, such as Tripoli, the oil crescent, Derna, and bits of Benghazi. For the general population in those areas and flashpoints, life is pretty desperate.

Political violence aside, there is a significant breakdown in law and order, particularly in Tripoli at the moment. Over the past month and a half, there has been a significant ramp-up in militia violence and criminality, and there are huge problems with the banking system, which was already under significant stress but is now almost not functioning. There is little to no connectivity between the banks and external banks, and Libyans are finding it very difficult to get cash. This is making the militias and local gangs work extremely hard to keep up their income, and violence is increasing in a similar way.

On the chances of the GNA and the House of Representatives coming to an understanding, we need to take a few steps back and have a look at the GNA and the HoR to work out why things have not been working so far in efforts to try to bring them together. We all remember that the House of Representatives was elected in 2014 in a free and fair election that was observed by the United Nations and the British Embassy, among others. Strategic communications at the time, by those who did not do very well in Parliament, put participation in those free and fair elections at about 17%, but that is about 17% of the entire population and takes

into account the 40% to 45% of the population who were under 18 and could not vote.

Among those who were eligible and had registered to vote, over 33% or 34% of the population took part in the elections. That was during a time when large parts of the country were boycotting, particularly the Amazigh, Tuareg and Tebu down south, and when the Libyan populace were being confronted by the very significant upswing in militia violence. Given that, I think the Parliament, quite rightly, feels that it has some sort of legitimacy and believes that as a body it should represent the Libyan people and be the political address where this politicking should take place.

As we know, the Government of National Accord was spun out of the Libyan Political Agreement and talks that were led by the United Nations and various international diplomatic agencies. The talks were predominantly held abroad, initially in Tunis and then in Skhirat in Morocco. The GNA have no levers or connectivity with the various powers on the ground. They were not elected and are highly fractured. Depending on who turns up, they have between five and nine deputy Prime Ministers and an associate leadership. They have found it very difficult to reach out of their location in Tripoli and engage with the various powers across Libya, including the House of Representatives.

General Haftar is only one guy. He is quite totemic because he has taken a stand. Very early on, a few years ago, he stood up to the militia intimidation of the HoR's predecessor, the General National Congress. Finding little purchase at the time in west Libya, he ended up in east Libya, where he is now, to all intents and purposes, co-operating and working under the auspices of the House of Representatives. But, as I said, he is only one guy, and he has a totemic leadership. Beneath him, there are sub-commanders with various levels of autonomy and freedom of movement. There is a lot of mission command on the army side, with the intent being expressed by General Haftar and his staff, and the actual operations being conducted by sub-units on the ground, with very strained lines of communication between them and General Haftar.

What I have to say is twofold. First, the GNA have been set an impossible task. They are viewed by a significant majority of Libyans within the country as a puppet Government imposed by a set of negotiations led by an outside body, the UN, that includes various participants who were not elected, did very badly in the last election in 2014, and are closely tied to various different militia interest groups.

The GNA have a very noble figurehead in Prime Minister Fayez al Sarraj. As we are all aware, he was elected to be the member of the House of Representatives for Hay al-Andalus in Tripoli, and, as one leading Libyan commentator said to me, he "was definitely the right choice for Hay al-Andalus but not for Libya". Both he and the GNA are products of political processes that have been run concurrently and separately from the democratic process in the House of Representatives.

**The Chairman:** That neatly opens the debate. Lady Symons has the next question.

Q2 **Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean:** That was very succinct and well expressed. There are a lot of external players. Quite apart from the internal chaos you described, external players also have their take and influence, some of it military, on what is going on. Can you give us a view both of the relative influence and effectiveness of the UN and the EU—in that respect you may want to single out some of the Member States—and of the influence Russia is having on what is happening, particularly with the big regional power, Egypt, sitting on the eastern side? Egypt clearly has quite a lot of influence over what is happening. I am sorry; it is a huge question, but you did the first overview brilliantly and maybe you can tackle this one too.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** Thank you, my Lady. It is a big question, but it can be addressed in a number of ways. I would like to start from within Libya to give an outline of how it works. That will perhaps lend some insight as to why different parts of the international community are engaging in different parts of Libya.

Libya has two main socioeconomic groupings. The first, which the Libyans refer to as “the top line”, or “the Arab line” or “Bedu line”, is the Arab tribes that spread from east to west, particularly on the border with Egypt where there is a very large tribe, the Awlad Ali, and across the north of Libya, from the Obaydat to the Barasa, the Awagir in Benghazi, the Magharba in Ajdabiya in the oil crescent, across to the Qadhadhfa in Sirte, the Warfalla, Tarhona, Zintan, Warshafana and Umshasha, and in the south more Qadhadhfa and Magharha. Let us not forget the Zuway as well down in the deep south-east. Those are the big, main Arab tribes. There are many other tribes, but they fit around those big operating tribal networks.

The second socioeconomic grouping is the “non-Arab line”, also known as “the coastal line”. They are made up of two or three different groupings. Along the southern border, predominantly in the south-east, are the Tebu. They are black Africans who live on both sides of the border. Across to the south-east are the Tuareg, and above them to the north, in the western mountains, the Amazigh. The Tuareg and the Amazigh are both Berber, but the Tuareg are nomadic Berber and the Amazigh are sedentary Berber. Where those two socioeconomic groupings collide and meet are the flashpoints in Libya.

The final constituent part of the non-Arab coastal socioeconomic grouping is Misrata. We have probably heard quite a lot about the Misrati. They are Libyans. They speak Arabic and look like Libyans, but in terms of the social fabric of Libya they are not Arabs; they are an Ottoman Empire era implant in Libya. Misrata is a very cohesive, successful, commercially oriented city with strong links to Turkey. Interestingly, over the past 200 to 300 years there has been migration of Misrati, both east and west, into eastern Tripoli—in view of that, one can understand what is going on in Tripoli—and across the Gulf of Sirte to Benghazi and up to Derna.

Interestingly, about 50% of Benghazi is ethnically Misrati. It is in those areas—Derna, Benghazi and Tripoli—where the flashpoints exist on the socioeconomic scale, and you can see the interplay between the two groupings.

What does that mean for the international players? I will start with the regional partners and then work back to Russia and the European Union and our allies in the area. All the regional powers have a view of what is going on in Libya; it is their backyard. They have a very significant interest, particularly Egypt, in security, with a view to Libya's energy resources. Libya plays a very significant role in people's thinking in the long term. They also have a strong social bond. I mentioned the Awlad Ali. About 200,000 with dual nationality straddle the border between Egypt and Libya, and they move backwards and forwards quite a lot.

Further to the south are Sudan, Chad and Niger. Sudan has a view of what is going on in Libya because of the role of the Islamists. There is a confluence of interest between the Islamist militias and various groupings in Libya and the powers that be in Sudan. For Niger, the interest is based more on commerce, trade and smuggling, but also security. In the west, Algeria is not looking at Libya primarily as somewhere it can get involved, because Algeria has a very insular approach to things and does not want to get involved in people's affairs, but it is acutely aware of Egypt's view of Libya. As the two regional powers on either side of Libya, they are both trying to understand where they are going.

Egypt is not alone in its view on Libya when it looks at the counter-terror situation. Part of the political problem in Libya at the moment is that the Arab tribes are linked predominantly with the Libyan National Army and the House of Representatives, although not entirely. On the other hand, there is a collection of predominantly non-Arab tribes, with their associates, linked with militias and predominantly Islamist political entities.

The Egyptians are acutely aware that the last thing they want is an Islamist-led entity, whether Muslim Brotherhood or otherwise, controlling Libya. If you look back a few years, to the 2012 election, everybody thought that the Muslim Brotherhood party, the Justice and Construction Party, would do very well. It was highly organised; it had great connectivity with external powers, be it America, France and others. The Arab tribes were in total disarray. The Qadhafi regime and the established interests were fractured. Everyone thought it would win, but it did not. There was a lot of anecdotal evidence suggesting that a number of leading Muslim Brothers from Libya were told to get on a flight and go to Egypt and tell Morsi why they had not been able to deliver the country, but things have changed. Egypt has a particular counterterror view and it is linked to that Islamist influence. The Egyptians are not alone. Others in the region have a strong view about Islamists in power and the various tools at their command, be they militias or otherwise. I am thinking particularly of Gulf states.

On the other side of that debate, Egypt is not alone in its interest in Libya. Other regional powers sitting on the other side of Libya's political divide are more closely associated with the Islamists and the militias. Libyans tell me that they look at countries such as Turkey and Qatar, which have reportedly very strong relationships with organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, among others, and the interest they take on the ground in Libya, whether in finance or guns and materiel, which was probably the state of affairs back in 2011, or now perhaps in less tangible areas of support, be it finance and/or political support at international level. The conflict in Libya on the two sides could be viewed as a potential proxy war for regional tensions between the traditional interest groups in Egypt and otherwise and the Islamists.

Moving on to Russia, my personal view is that it has not played a very large role in Libya to date, but what it has done has had a very significant effect on the international network. We have been observing Russia's overt engagement with both sides over Misrata, and with General Haftar and the House of Representatives. The Russians receive emissaries from the House of Representatives, the GNA and the State Council. There are other reports of more technical engagement on the ground either in Libya or with allies nearby, potentially in Egypt. When you weigh them in the balance with the technical engagement, potentially, by other powers like ourselves, our allies and the European Union, the commitments that Russia is making to Libya are not very large at all, but I suspect they have been used more effectively and the Russians have gained a lot more political influence on the ground for the very small amount of engagement they have been able to do than we have done over the last few years.

Moving to the EU, UK and—if I may include it—the US; back in 2011, there was clear leadership from the West on engagement and intervention in Libya, whether led from the front or rear, with Secretary of State Clinton, Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy of France. That sort of engagement was married to some very clear P3 leadership on the ground in Libya from the three Ambassadors: Chris Stevens, who was murdered in Benghazi in 2012, Sir Dominic Asquith, and Antoine Sivan of France. Unfortunately, in 2012 two of those very fine ambassadors left the field, one permanently and the other 're-rolled' to other duties, and the French ambassador carried on in a very strong way, but alone.

At the political level there were significant changes, first with President Sarkozy departing the field, Clinton moving on to other things, and now, finally, Prime Minister Cameron. Politically, within the international community, there is potentially an opportunity for more leadership to be given. I do not want to say there is a vacuum of ownership or leadership at political level, but that sort of engagement and appetite to own what is going on in Libya does not seem to exist now as it did then. In its place, we have concerted efforts from some very dedicated officials, whether from our departments in the UK or from multinational and international bodies, such as the EU and the UN, with all their technical programmes

working through various departments on the ground. Unfortunately, the effect they are seeking to achieve will be quite limited, because they are operating in a political framework that no longer reflects the reality on the ground. I hope that has not rambled too much.

**Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean:** It was brilliant. Thank you.

**Earl of Oxford and Asquith:** Our Foreign Office is wagging its finger at Russia, and saying that it should not meddle in Libya. Are the Russians meddling? Are they fracturing further an already fractured political situation, or do they have anything to offer?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** Libya is fractured, and there are various reasons for that. Part of the reason is that the militias and the political entities they support or are attached to have withdrawn their support and are boycotting the democratic process in the House of Representatives. There is fracturing between the official government bodies within Libya and the mirroring, parallel structures that have been set up, whether under the State Council and the General National Congress or under the GNA. Unfortunately, they are all funded by the Central Bank of Libya. Reasons integral to the Libya situation today explain why it is fractured and why that fracturing continues.

It is into that fractured mix that I think Russia is finding itself being very slowly drawn. Some of its high-profile engagements include the passage of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* along the coast and the helicoptering to it of General—now Field Marshal—Khalifa Haftar for a good photo op. That, along with whatever technical engagement the Russians are providing on the ground in support of operating and maintaining equipment and various other things, is relatively limited in the grand scheme of things. What they are doing is moving into an area that at political level has been left quite open. There is a lot of technical engagement from the Western powers, through various international bodies, but at the political level no one really wants to own it. Therefore, Russia probably finds itself quite easily being invited to go in, see people and do things because no one is telling it not to.

Q3 **Baroness Suttie:** Thank you very much for that fantastic overview. One of the countries you have not mentioned specifically is Tunisia. Could you say a little about relations with Tunisia, in particular security issues on the border?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** Tunisia is ever so slightly out of my area of expertise, so I would not want to go into it in too much detail. The impression I have from friends and colleagues who work more closely with Tunisia is that a large swathe of the hard-core radical Islamist groups that operate around the Middle East come from Tunisia. Many of them have found their way into Libya, whether to seek sanctuary or to do more active things.

Tunisia is in real trouble and has significant challenges. Its Government, along with allies from Europe and other places, are trying to address

those at a technical level, but they are not aided by the lack of border security on Libya's side, or by the lack of cohesion and unity within what we call the international community towards the ideology of Islamism. In the past, Western powers, particularly the United States, but also others, took a very simplistic view of Islamists. The pendulum may now have swung a bit too far and we are perhaps taking too nuanced an approach and missing the wood for the trees, which is that Islamism is at its core a social revolutionary movement that recruits very heavily from among the lower working classes who have very good levels of education but struggle to break into the establishment in various countries. Islamism as an ideology is used by various groups, whether militant or otherwise, to overturn established regimes. Tunisia has its own troubles in that regard.

**Q4** **Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** You may not want to answer this, but it seems to me that you came very close to saying that the international community backed the wrong side. Why did it not go with the elected House of Representatives? Did it see the militias abandoning the HoR and think that another government route would work? What was going on? What happened?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** If I may, I will stick with my own personal experience. I have a view that is informed by a whole range of things, but it is probably safer to stay with my personal experience. Within a week or two of the election for the House of Representatives in 2014, the initial results, not the formal ones, were published in Tripoli. It was very clear that the Islamists' interests and their allies among the Misrati and other non-Arab equities within Libya had not done as well as they had done before and, essentially, they had lost the election; they would not have a controlling stake in any way in the future body.

At the same time, there was an uptick in violence from militias in both Tripoli and Benghazi for one reason only, which was to control the ground. Understanding that they were no longer going to have any major influence within the elected body, the militias wanted finally to eject the armed forces based at Tripoli International Airport, which were aligned with the more popular traditional interest groups, in order fully to control Tripoli. In Benghazi, they sought to eject from Benghazi similarly linked traditional armed interest groups, whether army, special forces or other tribally aligned forces, because one of the last decisions the General National Congress had made without military intimidation was that the future HoR was to sit in Benghazi in order to get away from militia intimidation in Tripoli.

As the violence increased in Tripoli, the new members of the HoR, even before they had been formally appointed, agreed among themselves that they could not sit in Tripoli. Benghazi was now a hotbed of militia violence, so they agreed to move to Tobruk, which since 2011 had remained very stable. Everyone said in 2011 that "the east fell in three days, but Tobruk fell in three hours", predominantly because of the Obaydat tribe and others. They took a look at what was going on and, quite rightly, joined the revolt against Gaddafi. The green flag came down and the tricolour went up; the security forces remained in place; there

was safety and security and public order; and that was why the Parliament moved there.

I argued very strongly with my old colleagues in the diplomatic community that the international community should move from Tripoli and follow the HoR to Tobruk, or wherever it went, because it was the expression of the Libyan people's will; it was the democratic body. It was nascent; it was young. Many of the members had never met one another before; it was like the first day at school. Yet again, the Libyans would need support and tangible commitment from the international community to make sure the process stayed on track.

Unfortunately, the vision and view of the international community and its various constituent parts did not extend far enough. There was a more immediate requirement just to get out of the trouble zone, and it was a lot quicker and simpler to move a couple of hundred kilometres to the west and out into Tunisia, or fly over to Malta, than to relocate 1,000 kilometres to the east in Tobruk. I have argued quite strongly for some time that that was a mistake. It sent the wrong message. It was unhelpful that, while we recognised the HoR, and our diplomats had been out to observe the elections and declared them free and fair, we did not then deploy expeditionary diplomats alongside it to support it, as we did with the National Transitional Council of Libya in 2011. At the same time, it sent a message to the militias that, if you demonstrate your *pouvoir* on the ground, you can get yourself a place at the table. The rest speaks for itself.

**Q5 Lord Horam:** I think we should narrow it down a bit from this tour d'horizon, which is extremely interesting, and look from Europe's point of view at the migration issues that Operation Sophia was trying to cope with. We are now trying to get better co-operation on the ground. Is that at all realistic, given the scenario?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** The chances of having any meaningful success as things are set up, under the political paradigm we have at the moment, are very limited. The EU and all its constituent parts and subordinate bodies now operating on the ground are being directed for political purposes to deal with the GNA.

**Lord Horam:** You think that is a mistake.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** The GNA are incapable as they currently stand of doing much.

**Lord Horam:** What should happen?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** There are two things. The European Union and its constituent parts are engaging in a very technical fashion. We probably need to take a step back and have a review of our policy in Libya to make sure that what we are technically trying to do is allied with the political realities.

**Lord Horam:** You are saying it is not.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** I am saying that they will have very limited chances of success, given the way they are currently set up and the paradigm under which they are operating. Many diligent, resourceful and experienced officials and advisers are bending their will and experience to try to deal with this, but they are operating under a paradigm that is not designed for success.

Border security in Libya is an interesting conundrum. Europeans find it very difficult to come to terms with the words 'border security'. European powers are very strong on subjects and capabilities such as border management, but in the European Union we do not actually have borders any more. A number of the agencies engaging on the ground in border security are doing so from a border management perspective, hence why there are lots of programmes and projects to engage with improving the security and management of border crossings and processes at international nodes, be it airports or others, but there has been less success and engagement on border security. For the Arabs writ large and for the Libyans in particular, border security is not a management issue; it is not something that traditionally has fallen under Ministries of Interior.

**Lord Horam:** When you say it is not a management issue, what do you mean by that?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** Border security is more of a military task. It is not about stamping passports and managing flows of people through recognised border crossings; it is about defending territory, resources and population. It is a much more military task in the Middle East, and that is down to both cultural and geographic reasons. When Western powers, be they commercial or governmental, have engaged in border security in the Middle East, it is one of the cultural things they have had to manage. There are a lot of border management specialists coming to talk to military commanders who need border security.

In Libya, border security has always been a challenge, whether it was under the King or the good colonel, but both the King and the colonel had very well-established methods of border security that recognised and used the existing tribal system along the land borders. That included formal forces—border guards who operated and patrolled in the area—and intelligence and security officials one layer back, who did both intelligence and security on the other side of the border, and penetrated their own forces to counter corruption and smuggling.

It also included border social-security. There would be donatives and flows of money and investment from the centre to the regions to keep the border populations on side, and confirm, reflect and recognise that they had a stake in their own border security. That does not exist at the moment. That is why many of the technical efforts on the maritime side of things, which are very diligent and absolutely right and necessary, ultimately struggle to achieve the end, which is to stop the flows of illegal migration.

There is a capillary action. Engagement at maritime level, without engaging on the land borders, feeds the process; for example, picking up migrants in the water incentivises traffickers not even to intend to try to get their cargo to the other side of the sea, because all they need to do is get them out 100 kilometres or so and they will be picked up. Efforts to try to improve the livelihoods of the migrants and non-Libyan communities that congregate along the coast mean there is one less thing for traffickers to worry about; we are coming in to help make their lives better.

My personal view is that if we want long-term meaningful success in stemming the flow of illegal migration and improving the lot of those already there on the ground, be they Libyan or otherwise, we need, first, to seek a political settlement and, secondly, to ensure that that political settlement includes the border tribes, so that their stake in society and in the Libyan state is tangibly recognised by significant development programmes that get them to buy into the system. By significant, I mean significant; there is a lot of low-level technical project engagement trying to develop alternative sources of income for various tribal communities, but we need something on a much larger scale that will bring over the whole community.

**Q6 Lord Stirrup:** We were told last year that there was loose co-ordination between the various people-smuggling groups and organisations in the central Mediterranean but no evidence of the involvement of large-scale organised crime. Do you agree with that assessment? Could you give us some sense of how the people-smuggling processes run now? Who organises them? Who are the principal actors? How do the networks operate, and who benefits from them? In particular, since Operation Sophia's key task was to disrupt the smugglers' business model, can you give us some sense of the efficacy of that business model today compared with the start of Operation Sophia?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** It would be nice to have a definition of organised crime. There is private organised crime and state-backed organised crime. My sense of the system, or the business model, is not that there is one overarching, controlling spider, with fingers in every country controlling everything. It is a natural progression; it is a business that has built up alongside something that was happening anyway—the movement of peoples. In each location, country and region, local entities, be they tribes, militias or criminal gangs, are servicing their patch or portion of that pipeline. They are not all civilians; in some countries, potentially Sudan and others, there is a lot of governmental engagement and local infrastructure that by day is policing and patrolling borders but by night is crossing them and ferrying across various entities, be they illegal migrants, terrorists or others.

As to the efficacy of the EU's engagement and Operation Sophia, it is too little and too late along the pipeline. I am told by very well-informed guys and girls working in the area at the moment that potentially up to 1 million migrants, if not more, are already in the pipeline coming from central Africa and the Horn of Africa. They take a long time to work their

way through the pipeline, but it is increasingly well established. The trick is to cut the capillary action, and so far there has been very little effort to do that. Were we to try to do it, we should be focusing our efforts along the land borders 1,400 kilometres to the south rather than within a stone's throw of the final destination, Europe.

**Lord Stirrup:** I get the sense, unsurprisingly from what you said earlier, that, if anything, Operation Sophia has strengthened the business model rather than weakened it.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** A close friend of mine, who works very closely on these matters, described it to me yesterday as "incentivising failure". Those groups will continue to do what they do as long as they get paid. If they keep getting paid and are successful in moving people from A to B, they will continue to do it. The real conundrum for the EU, but also the UN, the UK and all our friends and allies, is that we are backing a political entity like the GNA, who we believe are the solution to Libya's troubles. I do not believe there is any solution to Libya's troubles; there is only productive forward management, progress. We can expect progress, but I do not think we will have a solution. There is no final end state where everyone will be happy.

The GNA are in large part beholden to the militias that protect and influence them, whether in Tripoli or elsewhere. Those same militias are very heavily engaged in that economy. Some of the programmes that are now being talked about and developed will, potentially, have hundreds of millions of euros pumped into them. My sense is that probably a lot of that money will not go anywhere near Libya; it will go towards technical expertise that will be delivered to try to help local organisations do what they need to do. What money does go to Libya will find itself subject to the same predatory pressures that every other bit of Libyan finance finds itself subject to, whether it is outside a bank, or government officials being intimidated in their offices.

Q7 **Baroness Suttie:** How do you assess the EU's approach to migration through the central Mediterranean routes, as set out in the Malta declaration this year? You have probably touched on some of this already in your previous answers.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** I will use this opportunity to summarise it. There is a lot of respectable technical engagement in the matter, but it is operating within a political paradigm that has been set by people further up the political food chain within the European Union and its constituent parts. The issue is one of political appetite, whether it is the navy, FRONTEX, the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya or any other civil organisation getting involved in trying to do things there. They are operating within paradigms set at political level and they are not being given the resources or political authority to go beyond that and do things.

For example, if we look at the United Nations mission, UNSMIL's mandate is one of co-ordinating and bringing together the various international bodies engaging in Libya; it is not one of leadership. It makes me think

that ultimately, if we take a few steps back, having talked about the very high-level political engagement at the beginning in 2011 and the very limited political engagement or ownership at the moment in comparison, the EU is a very diverse set of institutions and there is no one person, man or woman, within that collection of institutions who owns the issue.

That makes me think of a letter from General Montgomery to Oliver Lyttelton, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, back in the late 1940s or 1950s. They were talking about the troubles in Malaya and the challenges of unifying all the different British organisations engaging in the counterinsurgency there. I think Montgomery wrote, "Lyttelton, Malaya. We need a plan. We need a man. Without either of these we are not going to get anything". If you look at the EU approach to Libya, at the moment the buck does not stop anywhere; there is no one political node one can go to that has a role to lead engagements on Libya, not just co-ordinate. That is all I would say about the EU approach.

The central Mediterranean route differs massively from the eastern Mediterranean and others, but the problems in Libya are political, and the migration challenges and the humanitarian crisis are all symptoms of that deeply rooted political crisis in Libya. That is where all our efforts should be focused. If we can find a political solution and some sort of settlement that is sustainable for Libya, we will begin to restore border security along the land borders, and achieve the desired results of stemming the flows of migrants, and thus preventing them putting themselves at the mercy of gruesome, merciless traffickers.

**Q8 Lord Dubs:** Last year, when we looked at all this we concluded that Operation Sophia faced "an impossible challenge" because of its inability to operate in Libyan waters or onshore in Libya. Do you think that is the be-all and end-all, and that we cannot do anything until there is a political solution?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** In the short term, we could perhaps expand our engagement beyond the GNA. For political reasons, we have limited our engagement in Libya to the GNA. We have UN Security Council resolutions that say the GNA are the only legitimate governing authority in Libya and we should deal only with them. That has massively restricted our ability to engage with the real powers on the ground in Libya, and it has undermined and excluded a very large piece of the country in the east and the south, which is more aligned to the House of Representatives and its caretaker Government in Al Bayda.

The first order of affairs should be to rebuild relationships with the HoR and develop genuine trust with that organisation and its members, both those who turn up and others elsewhere in Libya who feel they cannot turn up, or choose not to. That is where we will find the authority to get more involved. The Libyans find it very difficult to let foreign powers come close to their shores, or get involved in their affairs on the ground, because there is a significant amount of distrust about our intentions and engagement. If we want to get more involved close to the shore and on

the shore, we should be dealing with the powers and authorities in Libya that have the legitimacy to authorise those sorts of engagements.

**Lord Dubs:** When you say we, do you mean the European Union?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** I think of the European Union as one example, but I also think of the UK and the US. In reality, the UK should have a big say in Libya. We have a very strong interest and a strong historical bond, which Libyans regularly remind me of every time I see them. As we all know, the country was established with the guidance and friendship of the United Kingdom back in 1951, which in itself was the product of a relationship that went back to the 1940s and our co-operation with Libyan forces in north Africa against fascism and the Italians.

While the US said in 2011 that it was on the back seat of our engagement in Libya, the reality is that over 50% of the bombing missions against Qadhafi and the troops of the Government of Libya were undertaken by the United States. Following the murder of Ambassador Chris Stevens, who was a very good man, the Americans, for their own reasons, stepped back from Libya and engagements there. We, the United Kingdom, have struggled to understand what our interests there are in the long term. Our bandwidth is very much taken up with other issues, both at home and abroad, and the European Union has a whole range of things that it needs to deal with. It is struggling to identify leadership and ownership of Libya. No one really wants to own it; it is somebody else's mess.

**Q9 Earl of Oxford and Asquith:** I want to concentrate on Operation Sophia, which is a naval operation. When you talked about capillary action and the incentivisation of failure, you probably answered most of the questions I wanted to ask. Do you think that concentration on training the coastguard and the navy has any meaningful sense in the overall strategy of Operation Sophia, which is to decrease migration? What could Operation Sophia develop into that is useful?

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** If I may, I will deal with the latter question last. Yesterday, it was reported in the press that the mayor of Zuwara reported that the Libyans had again lost control of their coast to fuel smugglers, who were dominating the coastline around them and continuing to smuggle fuel backwards and forwards to Tunisia and Europe without any real interdiction. If you lose control of your coastal territory to fuel smugglers, you have probably also lost it to the hard-core terrorists and very heavily armed human traffickers. There is now a technical engagement under Operation Sophia to engage with authorities on the ground who are overmatched. That is probably the best way to describe them. They are overmatched and put in an impossible position; they are being asked the impossible—to try to reclaim control of their coastline.

The army has a phrase that I cannot use here. Forgive me. It is broken and it is not the correct tool. When you have a hammer, all problems look like nails, so when you are using naval forces they want to look at coastal, naval things and training; they do not want to get involved in the

politics. I do not think I can add more value to that, other than to say that the Libyan coastguards are operating in the most impossible of circumstances and cannot be asked to address the political problems that underpin the challenge that migration gives all of us.

**Q10** **Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** I want to pursue the issue of migration. Part of the European Council's support for the GNA was to improve conditions for migrants in camps; the Malta declaration was to improve conditions for migrants in camps and promote their integration into Libyan society. You have talked about that, but I want to ask you a little about your assessment of that plan.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** I reread it this morning to make sure I had not missed anything. It is funny how we came up with that idea without really engaging the Libyan authorities. I have to be very careful about what I say here. I am a great fan of the Libyan people, but they have their own internal challenges, and their views on ethnic minorities, races and sexes are not the same as the way we view and operate in the constituent parts of the UK. If you go back to 2012, one of the only things the General National Congress agreed on, even though it was mortally split between traditional interest groups and predominantly Islamist-led non-Arab interest groups, was the disfranchisement of the Tuareg people. They were then kicked off the pensions and access to education that they had enjoyed for the past 40 years under the last regime. That was the only thing the General National Congress actually agreed.

It is very noble to try to address the living conditions of migrants in Libya and to get them to integrate into Libyan society in a place that is very tribally based with deep cultural roots. Failing to engage with the democratically elected authorities, which we still recognise as the sole political address, does not lend itself to setting that programme up for success.

**Q11** **The Chairman:** We have time for one more question. I thought we would run out of time, but we are fine at the moment. We would like to get a feel from you as to where we go next.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** That is a very good question. I would like to say a number of things that hopefully will inform where we go next. The first thing is to go back to the question asked of many Foreign & Commonwealth Office and European officials and others engaged in Libya: if the GNA does not work what is plan B? We need to rephrase that question and understand that the GNA is plan B. Plan A was the HoR. Plan A was democracy and elections, and a process of re-establishing the state of Libya on a democratic basis post 2011. I do not think we have given enough effort to trying to heal the House of Representatives in Libya. When the House of Representatives relocated, when it was internally displaced and went to Tobruk, and some of its members—the more Islamist-aligned and Misrati-aligned members—boycotted it, we were not in a position to influence that and encourage them back to the HoR because we were not in the country.

If you look at the way we engaged in 2011, with the deployment of expeditionary diplomats and the injection of huge amounts of political capital into the nascent political process under the National Transitional Council of Libya, and compare it with now, which is very stand-offish, with remote engagement from Tunis and elsewhere, any future review of our engagement in Libya should hopefully come up with a view about deploying expeditionary diplomats alongside the HoR. I am conscious of the others who might be following me shortly. They will have their own view. I bow to their superior knowledge or intimate day-to-day knowledge of Libya, but I do not think enough effort has been made to heal the HoR. I do not think we can write it off just yet. The divisions in Libya are very deeply entrenched, but not so entrenched that they cannot be resolved with vision, a strategy and some leadership. Once we have identified the right person to lead our engagement in Libya, we will be in a better place to come up with a strategy and a plan, which we can put into effect in the first instance, I would argue, through the HoR.

**Q12 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** I am conscious that you have not talked much about General Haftar. Other things that we read and hear refer to him in a more significant way.

**Joseph Walker-Cousins:** He is very significant. I mentioned at the beginning that he has a very totemic leadership. To put it in perspective, I met many commanders of the militias, many of them Islamist and others tribally aligned. I met many commanders from the Libyan army, many who fought for Qadhafi but also many, particularly in the east, who revolted against Qadhafi in 2011.

The Libyan army is not a militia; it is not a creature of the former Qadhafi regime. It evolved out of the Senussi liberation army that the British helped train and establish in Egypt's western desert in the Second World War. It is a very ancient institution for the Libyans. Compared with ours, it is very young—it is a baby—but for the Libyans it is a very real institution. After 2011, when the army in the east revolted against Qadhafi and joined the very broad-based popular revolt, the army structure had already been pretty much ground down by him. He pulled the ladder up after him. He did his coup from the army, and did not want the army to stage any more coups. The army was very badly invested. Any real leadership in the army was very much stamped on or allowed to depart, but the army existed.

In 2011, the Islamist militias began a deep, well-planned assassination campaign. It was not just against commanders of the Libyan army, many of whom rose up against Qadhafi and were working in very close co-ordination with NATO forces; they started to assassinate not only the commanders but the fabric of the Libyan army—the adjutant-general corps, the head of military police and the head of the military prosecutor general's office. That is the social fabric of the army that keeps it together on the ground and helps the teeth arms to operate. In the British military, we would call it a JPTEL—a joint prioritised effects list.

The very ruthless application of that hit list, particularly in the east, meant that the army fragmented. When we look at the army now, we think, "they're just a bunch of ragtag guys. Look at their uniforms. They cannot really act together. There's no real cohesion and co-ordination between Haftar and his guys". Rather, I think that what they are doing is very credible and commendable, given that they suffered such a withering assassination campaign from 2011 onwards. The army has been able to survive and maintain some form of cohesion, now with the totemic leadership of General Haftar, without major engagement from Western forces or armies and very limited engagement from regional powers. I think that is commendable.

Haftar is very polarising, but he is only one man. The Misrati and other potentially Islamist militias do not like him because he represents the traditional interest groups, the tribes, the army and more popular elements of the Libyan people who have won each of the three elections and with better and better results. It is perhaps not for me to say whether he has a role in the future. We should take our lead from the Libyans. The HoR is broken; it needs to be healed. We should work with whoever the Libyans choose to lead them, and at the moment the HoR is endorsing General Haftar.

**The Chairman:** Mr Walker-Cousins, that is a wonderful note on which to finish this evidence session. It has been a very informative session for us. We are all greatly appreciative of your time and expertise. Thank you so much for coming. To reiterate, we will send you the transcript for you to check to see if there are any things that need changing.