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Transcript Q&A

Libya: Re-establishing the State

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Chair: Sir Richard Dalton

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Sir Richard Dalton:

We have an opportunity for questions now. I should be grateful if you would stand, wait for the microphone, and then tell us who you are and your affiliation. First here.

Question 1:

Good morning. I'm Lindsay Hilsum, the author of a recent book on Libya called *Sandstorm*, and the international editor of Channel 4 News. You say that people who don't criticize the regime under Gaddafi lived in fear of the security apparatus. So I'm wondering if you can tell us why you passed Law 37 on 2 May, which bans insults against the people of Libya or its institutions, criticism of the revolution, or glorification of Gaddafi. Because that does seem like an abuse of human rights and freedom of speech. Thank you.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Thank you, madam, for your good question. I can tell you that first of all, we don't pass – we as a government don't pass laws. We propose maybe a draft. But in the meantime, I can probably read the minds of my colleagues in the NTC and tell you that it is amazing what we have been going through since we took office; a tremendous effort to destabilize the country, a tremendous effort to undo anything the world community has done for human rights and to free, to help free the Libyan people. I guarantee you. Now of course, as we all know, as the transitional government is a transitional one, the NTC is also a transitional one. I guarantee you that the sooner we get to the elections, and then have the general assembly formed, the congress, I guarantee you that such laws will disappear completely from the screen.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you very much.

Question 2:

Thank you. Prime Minister, there's been a lot of speculation about the potential approval or annulment of commercial contracts with foreign or perhaps local companies, and also that perhaps certain committees have been established at some level to look at contracts, particularly in the oil sector and in the real estate and construction sector. I wonder if you could

shed a bit of light on the role and status of any such committees and, more broadly, whether such contracts will ultimately be decided on at, for instance, an executive level by the future government that comes in, or by an act of parliament and law passed by a future parliament – or indeed by the judicial decision, perhaps by the supreme court. Thank you very much.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Thank you for asking the question. I would say – and I take my chance here, but I'm sure in a place as wonderful as this is with such a wonderful group, you are committed to human rights and to transparency and to the rule of law, I am sure that no one will disagree that things should be done in a transparent matter, or fashion. I also agree, I am certain, I am also almost certain, but maybe I would say certain, that none of us would agree that corruption is something that we'll have to live with just because it is there.

So what we are doing is simply verifying the fact that all the contracts were signed because they were worth signing, for both sides – they were done in a legal format, abiding by both the national and the international related laws, and that's it. And if that's the case, than irrespective of who signed the contract, the contracts will be respected. And we'll do that in a very transparent fashion. We're not going to hide anything. But we will also show to the world, if there was any corruption, that there was corruption. And if there was pressure imposed on anybody who signed the contract, we'll tell you, we'll let you know.

The committees we formed were not necessarily... I mean, they seem to be misunderstood. It's a committee of professionals who have respect for the laws, to the meaning of a contract. They are simply looking at the details to figure out if there was anything wrong done. And that's about it. I can assure you that we don't have a pre... or we have not decided on any contract so far being something that we need to just let go because we didn't like the party or what was signed. So I can – I would like to assure everybody that we are in the process of looking at contracts out of respect for both sides. We don't want to have a company being looked at and disrespected just because of its conceptions. So it is going to be for the sake of the companies who have those contracts with the past Libyan government – I can assure you that we want to respect every contract signed. That's the intent.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you for that very full answer. Please.

Question 3:

Thank you very much, it's a pleasure and an honour to hear you. The tremendously exciting development in North Africa is the emergence of the new Libya because Libya is destined to become an engine of growth in North Africa. If I may, I'd like to just seek your thoughts on when Libya will become a veritable engine of growth – what do you think the time horizon is going to be for Libya to really start influencing economies like Tunisia and even Egypt? And secondly, what is your view on the Maghreb Union and the importance of that going forward? Thank you.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Two questions: the pace of the pick-up of economic growth, and secondly the Arab Maghreb Union.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

I think it's – I see them as being related in many ways. First of all, Libya has always been – well, not has always been, I should qualify the statement – but the Libyan people have always been seen by the Maghreb countries as being people that they can work with. We want to serve, Libya wants to serve, as a positive force, or as a means to bring together the Maghrebian countries so that we can fuel the engine and move forward with such a tremendous group of countries that have resources that can complement each other and do something meaningful, not only for their own people, but for the neighbouring countries. We are Africans, we are Arabs, we are Muslims, and the resources are there to be able to get going. It is very unfortunate, as I mentioned earlier, that such a tremendous group have not had a chance, a real chance, to sit together and brainstorm in a fashion that has a serious objective of getting things done and moving forward in a matter that gets everybody's attention but in the meantime doing something meaningful for those countries.

We have started communicating with our neighbours. I just came back with a group of my colleagues in the cabinet from Tunis. We felt we can work together easily. We have started, in fact, working together on many issues, including economic ones. We will be meeting again in Tripoli any time soon.

We will keep at it. We're not just going to sign agreements that we put on shelves and forget about them. We want to do things that are meaningful to both sides. We may take our time a little bit, because we want to make sure that these are realistic objectives, but we'll get them done. So this is one step forward.

We have also been talking to the Algerians. Chairman Jibril... *afwan*, Chairman Abdel Jalil went and visited Algeria [sic]. We have been in communication, and we'll get to the point when we start things going. The Moroccans are also in the same manner. The Egyptians, we're waiting for the elections so we can take a serious step towards them. So we're doing that. And also the neighbouring countries down south – Sudan and Niger and Chad – Niger we had, we just had the prime minister of Niger coming to visit, and we had a tremendous visit. We enjoyed having him there. We're serious about the fact that we have some remnants of the past regime in Niger moving freely and trying to destabilize the country, but that put aside, things were very friendly, and everything was fine. I can assure you soon after the election and the formation of the government, the new government, I like the term 'engine of growth', will get going.

Thank you.

Sir Richard Dalton:

We're going to stay with the economy a little bit longer. Is your question about the economy? No? Well, I'm going to hold you in reserve. Who wishes to talk about the economy? Please.

Question 4:

Good morning, and thank you for your presentation. I would love to hear about one of the key pillars driving in economy in Libya, obviously, and that is the oil and gas industry. And just your thoughts there, particularly in regards to whether you think there needs to be further incentives to encourage new exploration, new development, to build on the production potential of the country, or whether you think given that we're now close to pre-war sort of levels, whether actually, you know, not that much needs to be done from that perspective.

And the second question I had was just how you think we as Libyans can overcome some of the embedded culture in some of the public institutions, such as the NSC, where everyone is sort of afraid of making decisions, and

encouraging more of a sort of a risk-taking attitude to sort of encourage better performance. Thank you.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Thank you. I thought the production levels we have achieved so far have been impressive. I don't know about how everybody else feels. But I think we surpassed the forecasts of many. A country coming out of a war such as the one we just came out from – I think to achieve the pre-war production levels, I'll tell you, I just cannot thank our colleagues in the oil and gas business in Libya for having done a tremendous job. And I guarantee you this wasn't like a piece of cake, you know, just go back to work – no, this was a very serious undertaking. I mean people really took a chance. This, just this example, will intensify our feelings, or our belief that we'll make it. We will certainly be the engine of growth. So I think we're happy with that.

But as you well know, and I'm sure you do, to further raise the production levels, the proper infrastructure has to be there. And the proper infrastructure for such new technologies, you know, enhanced oil recovery and all kinds of stuff has to be there. It wasn't – and unfortunately, it is not right now, and this opens up new doors for those in that business to get into it, to have very specific, solid proposals, nothing like the ones we had before, where just the man upstairs signs that he wants, but then he asks you to do them favours, protect them from any course that would be after them for abuse of human rights. But the door is well open. In a transparent fashion, we welcome every company that can help us move forward and enhance our production further in the future.

As far as making decisions, you see, we have to be careful in what to do. We're not going to sign contracts just because we have to do it. We want to sign major, no problem, contracts at all, no problem – but they have to be meaningful. And we'll do it in a transparent fashion. I personally, and many in the cabinet, we don't get paid for what we're doing. But you want to do that just to send a signal that we're not... we can't be bought. We want to do the right thing for this country that has been suffering, or was suffering, for 42 years. A country as rich as Libya, the income level is so modest that I can't even mention it, okay. So don't worry about not making decisions. We'll get going, and we'll act on any proposal that is meaningful.

Sir Richard Dalton:

I think the question was a little bit wider. It related to the culture that has inevitably grown up over a long period when all decisions get taken of any weight at a very high level. Individuals in management positions become very reluctant to take initiatives for fear they're going to do the wrong thing and be reprimanded, and similarly they are reluctant to delegate their powers to younger, more junior people. This of course can stifle innovation, and it can reduce the engine of growth.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Right, I see what you mean now. You know, I was in the [United] States when people started talking about 'flat organizations', and empowering people, and so on and so forth. And this is, I agree, it's a cultural problem. We're working on it, and we want to be careful, because the culture of corruption is still there, a serious one, but we've tried to balance things out, to get to a point where people are empowered.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Empower people cautiously? A clear message, thank you. I have a question here please.

Question 5:

Thank you. I have a question about medical health. Quite rightly, there was an enormous focus on the treatment of injured fighters and of course in the general public health area as well, following the takeover of Benghazi and later, Tripoli. I just wonder, to those who ask, how can you reconcile the very poor conditions which, frankly, I've seen myself in the [inaudible] hospital in Benghazi, and the Tripoli Medical Centre, for example, with the fact that funds were available from quite an early stage, from early October, from 9 October, from the first sales [inaudible] to the European porters, and the unfreezing of funds on 19 December by the UN – in other words, it would appear that there is cash in the system, but the ability to transfer the availability of funds in the system to the meaningful, practical assistance in those very important medical facilities has perhaps been slower than the ideal. Do you have any thoughts on those who have that question? Thank you.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

If I can just go back to Mr Dalton's point, that there is really this cultural issue, of people being able to spend properly, and also, really, you look at the cabinets, the members of the cabinet, you can see that each and every one of them, both ladies and gentlemen, have the credentials of being an administrator, especially compared to the past regime. You also look at their credibility, that's not in question. And you look at their ability to make decisions, you can see that they can do that, knowing that nobody would question them, question their integrity. And then you look at the second level, maybe, and you get a similar feeling.

Go down below, unfortunately, and this is a problem. Yeah, so I think this is an issue that for us, in this cabinet, and the ones coming after us, we'll have to take on seriously. We do have a problem of – and I can only explain this by saying there are those who still are interested in slowing down the process for their own sake, their objectives of course are fuelled by others in the past regime, and there is also this inability to move and just, you know, get things done, and that set of mind, or mindset of being can-do. You know, a lot of people, it's very important, they don't have this attitude, this can-do attitude. Among – and I'm not talking about revolutionaries, it's a problem among Libyans as a whole; they can do. But they lost this feeling. So that's one reason.

The other reason I'll tell you, I mean, people are really careful about spending money. Now we are at a stage, we have identified all the projects that can be reignited, if you want, and get going, and we are in the process of – we have already signed contracts, in fact, with companies to get them going, including those hospitals and medical care institutions. But in this area, for example, in healthcare, this is an area, a critical area where we are in need of help, so we invite serious proposals. We are serious about security, we're very serious about education, and my colleague here, who is the minister of higher education, will be sending, as agreed by the UK government, a good number of students to the UK. We're very serious about selection of universities – we want them to get the best out of the best. And – no, we'll surprise you again.

Sir Richard Dalton:

There is of course a tremendous tradition of education cooperation between Britain and Libya, and it's very good news that you've been able to work on that during your visit. And it's very impressive, to us, that you've brought such a large delegation of your ministerial colleagues to assist you during this visit.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

By the way, if I may, I would like to just change a little, and I want to answer in a serious manner, but my first visit to London was in 1965. I was a kid at that time, I spent maybe the summer, I stayed with a family to learn English. I went to a small school, a summer school. I lived then near Swiss Cottage, yeah – it was, I remember, a road called Finchley Road, right? And the house where I stayed was, if I recall exactly, it was Adelaide Road. Yeah. So this is a beautiful country, beautiful people, you know. Lots of interesting places, historical places. Every building is impressive, you know? So yeah, I would like for our young men and women to come here and go to Oxford and Cambridge and University of Manchester and all those good schools, you know?

Sir Richard Dalton:

The more the merrier.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

London School [of Economics], yeah, of course. London School of Economics, but we'll send you better ones.

Question 6:

Hi. You said very strongly that you're promoting human rights, you're on a transition to human rights and democracy. You also said that Law 37 was unfortunately, in your view, necessary at this time of transition. What I wanted to ask you is, what if anything are you doing, despite Law 37, to promote freedom of the press and defend that freedom, and similarly, more broadly, to promote and defend an active civil society and non-governmental organizations, which are a crucial part of not just democracy but also for building an economy and society?

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

A very good question. Clearly, I mean, I've never seen a free press in Libya, except during the 60s there was a couple of newspapers, one of them was called *Al-Balagh*, I'm talking about the one in Tripoli. And there was one or two in Benghazi – in Benghazi, you have more activities in that area. Now just come and see what kind of free press we have. I mean, in the last few years,

you can imagine, you know. Even our – even the government station is free. I mean they, sometimes they do it on purpose, they don't want to tell the good things, I don't know why, but they get to that point. But they are free. So in terms of freedom of press, this is something that we probably agree on. And we're not going to do anything that would slow that down or stop it.

I'm sure you can understand, though, that this is a very critical period. Our intelligence information tells us that there are, I mean there are many who are trying to get us to a point where we can't do the elections. And it's very unfortunate. This would please our people living in neighbouring countries, sometimes close, sometimes remote countries, and they are moving freely. So all what we are trying to do is to tell them look, slow down, let's get going with the elections, and then you can form your own parties, even if this was against, or different, totally different from the new councils. In terms of civil societies, we [inaudible] them, we meet with them. We participate in their activities if invited. We see women being so active, we promote that. We want – Libyan women have surprised even us for the tremendous effort that they have done with the revolution and continue to do.

By the way, the person who got the highest number of votes in Benghazi local elections is a lady. So she – so that tells you how much Libyans believe in women and youth and – I tell you, I'm optimistic – I'm very happy that things have changed. And yes, we do have our challenges, but it comes with the territory, and it comes with the time we are going through now.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you very much. Of course, that's often what people say, that emergency situations require emergency measures. I think what worries people in some quarters is that - when will there ever be a moment when the government can say it's out of an emergency and then return to a more normal level of legislation and permission and standards of freedoms. I believe that many of us believe that the constitutional declaration, with its firm statement of intent about human rights is a vital founding document for the new Libya, for the establishment of a new state. Can you comment at all on the role of that original declaration declaring the principles of the new state after the election, or is that all just left for the new assembly?

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Well, it's left for the new assembly, but I can guarantee you that the new assembly and the constitution of the new Libya will guarantee human rights and will guarantee freedom of press. Because these are certain values that people – that caused the revolution take place. We'll never be able to even think, if we ever think, that this is something we want to compromise.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you. Please. Could you wait for the microphone. Keep your questions short, please.

Question 7:

As the only Arab who is calm in the universe, I have a simple question for you: do you have a minister of justice with you coming in your delegation? That's all, thank you. It's short.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

No we don't, but I invite you to come and visit Libya if you want to talk to him, or maybe he would come anytime soon.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you. Please.

Question 8:

Thank you for this opportunity. If this was being held in Libya, I'd be breaking the law for my criticism of the government. Under Law 37, I would be breaking the law if this was being held in Libya, so thank you for coming to the UK. Law 38, which is one of the laws that wasn't mentioned directly in your speech but you allude to, is the amnesty law. And in the same sentence, you imply that the amnesty law guarantees some form of dealing with impunity, which is slightly perplexing to me because that law was drafted as a blanket immunity, and impunity in fact, for any acts necessitated by the revolution and for the protection of the revolution, which is a blanket amnesty for the revolutionaries and classifies what is subject to the amnesty by who commits the act, and not the act itself, which is not an amnesty law.

So I would like to pick your brains on how you think that establishes the rule of law in Libya, or indeed creates a form of respect for the law when actually what we're saying is it doesn't matter who you are, if you're a revolutionary you're above the law. Thank you.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

I'll take on the first part of your comment. I think it's an important comment but I respectfully tell you that it looks like you don't know what's going on in Libya. So I invite you to come and visit. Apparently you talked and spoke to the wrong people. So, but I tell you, we'd be happy to get you to come, we'll listen to the same question, and you will see that people will hug you, ladies will hug you and tell you that look, we're happy you're here, we're happy that you're coming to the new Libya who will listen to anybody and everybody, and we'd tell you that if your question is hurting their feelings or hurting the revolution and the principles of the revolution, they'd tell you, why are you doing this? In a nice and friendly fashion. So don't worry. I guarantee you that you will be very well received. I am not a lawyer. I'm an engineer by training, so a bit on the practical side, you know. Not that lawyers are not. And I'll be happy to let you go to our meeting, too, to get into those details.

But I can assure you the following: if you look at who is still there, in the government institutions, if you look at the private sector, and if you look at universities, if you look at students, this is just a random sample, I guarantee you will find some who were working for the past regime, in the past. And I can tell you this, because I know for a fact that that's the case. Those who are harmless, and I mean harmless, not necessarily passive, those who do not intend to hijack our revolutions, and the principles of that revolution, they are welcome. They are still with us. Those who are going to take it away from us – we're not going to let them do it.

And we're not going to hurt them, but we're going to take them to court. And they will have their day in court. But we're not going to let them just take it away. It's very costly, very expensive, human lives were lost – you look at our young men and women, parts are taken away, and I'm sure as a lady you would probably take that to heart. Ladies – both men and women were raped in a country that never thought that this could become something – a daily practice, or an hourly practice. So I tell you, it was – I don't think you – I'm sorry I'm telling you this, it's better, but I think you have a fair chance to go through the pains of 42 years of abuse of human rights, of having a gentleman – if he is a gentleman, I don't know what you call it – coming here,

and I'm not sure if he was asked such a question. But we take such a question to heart, and the next time you come, come to Tripoli, I'll be happy to give you the opportunity to go to a prison where people who directed, past Libyans, both men and women, and who stole the Libyan peoples' money for 42 years, who abused him, who hurt him, in a cruel fashion, and I'm sure you will be hostile. And you can come and attend the meeting in court, see the procedures, monitor the practices, and judge for yourself. We will take good care of you.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Thank you very much.

Question 8:

Sabah al-khayr, Doctor Ibrahim. I don't know if you can see me or not. What are the plans to liberalize and diversify the economy, and what's the status of the water sector in Libya please? The status of the water sector.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Water is very important. I'm probably stating the obvious by saying that we have some water resources that we push from down south to north and then spread it across, but this is not going to be our only resource. We have to get going with the desalination plants. I think this is something very important. So that's where, I guess, we have to start thinking about some serious plans, thinking about all the resources. What we did is we – there are three or four institutions, agencies, that work on water, so we brought them all together and formed one so that we could have integrated planning for water resources. And we're working on this. But I think desalination is going to be one of them.

As far as liberalizing the economy, we are encouraging the private sector. We are working hard on small- and medium-size grants for the young men and women in Libya. We are emphasizing partnerships and technology transfer, or know-how transfer. I think this is what we're trying to do so far, what we have been trying to do so far. But the Libyan economy will be a free one, and open, for sure.

Sir Richard Dalton:

Prime Minister, thank you very much indeed for answering so many questions so patiently. And you've given us a very thorough account of how you and your government are reacting to many of the most pressing problems of Libya. I'm particularly glad to hear that the, that someone is taking a grip of the water sector. I remember when I was ambassador, I counted six agencies dealing with the water sector. You have achieved a great deal in your short months as prime minister. And we wish you and your colleagues and those who will come after you, after the elections – maybe it will be some of you as well, who stay in your current work. We wish you every success in confronting these enormous challenges in the rest of the year. Thank you very much indeed.

Abdurrahim El-Keib:

Thank you very much.