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Transcript

Was it Worth it? Reflections on the Libyan Revolution

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Elham Saudi:

Good afternoon, and welcome to Chatham House. I'll introduce myself very briefly. I'm Elham Saudi. I'm the co-founder and director of Lawyers for Justice in Libya. And I'll also make a disclosure, as a lawyer, upfront: I'm a big fan of Lindsay's, so I might be slightly biased in the course of this afternoon.

It gives me a lot of pleasure, as a result, to introduce Lindsay. She'll speak for about 30 minutes, and then we'll open it to the floor for some questions. Lindsay, as I'm sure you all know, is Channel 4's international news editor and the author of *Sandstorm*, which is one of the reasons we're all here. She has covered some of the major conflicts in the past two decades, including the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and the Israel-Palestinian conflict. In 2011 she reported in Libya, but also in Egypt and Bahrain. She also reported extensively from Iran and Zimbabwe, and was the China correspondent for *Channel 4 News* from 2006 to 2008. In 2004, she witnessed the US assault on Fallujah from the front lines with a Marine unit. And in 1994, she was the only English-speaking correspondent in Rwanda at the start of the genocide.

She has been the Royal Television Society Journalist of the Year, and she has won the Charles Wheeler Award and the James Cameron Award and has been recognized by One World Broadcasting Trust and Amnesty International. I'll hand it over to you now.

Lindsey Hilsum:

Thank you very much, Elham. And thank you all very much for braving the rain to come here today. I really appreciate it. On the way here I was feeling a bit nervous because I've been doing quite a lot of talks around the book, but mainly for the general public, and I thought, Chatham House – there's going to be all these people that know more about Libya than me in the audience. So, wherever you are and whoever you are, I hope – please be indulgent.

Because I'm not a long-term student of Libya. I'm somebody who went to Libya for the first time last year at the beginning of the revolution. And I loved it. For a start, it was huge fun, and then it was just... it was that amazing sense of being there where history is happening, and when history is happening. Throughout the year, I was in that privileged position, that people who'd never been able to speak, to tell their stories before, because they had lived under dictatorship for 42 years, were able to talk, and wanted to talk, and wanted to tell their stories. So that's the point where I started with the journalism at Channel 4 News, and also with the book – Libyan people's stories, through the eyes of people I met. So, I'm not an expert on policy or on

Libyan history. I'm a journalist who's spent a year, most of a year, in Libya, trying to understand what Libyan people think and feel and fear and hope.

Today, maybe – and the title of the talk, which I came up with, was, 'Was it Worth it?' And then I thought, after this, well who am I talking about? Was it worth it to NATO? Was it worth it to the British government? Or was it worth it to the Libyans? And maybe those are three different things that we can look at. And when we think about was it worth it for the Libyans, today, the last couple of days haven't been good. We see that the National Transitional Council appears to have dismissed the cabinet of the interim government, including possibly [Abdurrahim] Al-Keib, the interim prime minister. I say appears to because I'm not quite sure if they have or if they haven't because nobody seems to be quite sure if they have or they haven't. Because they're not transparent and these things are not, you know, they're not clear. And you know, you check all your Libyan websites, and so on – and some people think that they have and some people think that they haven't.

So what I think that that indicates is how difficult it is for Libya and for Libyans at this moment. Because what happened in Libya last year was the only true revolution of the Arab Spring, the Arab Awakening, whatever we want to call it. The way I see it is that in Tunisia, it was as if the Ben Ali family had sort of hijacked the organs of state for a while, and now they've gone back. In Egypt, it was really a military coup disguised as a revolution, in some ways. But in Libya it was a true revolution. Everything was overthrown. Everything is upside-down. And so it's year zero. And it's year zero because I say everything was overthrown, the organs of the state, but there weren't actually that many organs of the state because that was part of the point of the way Gaddafi ruled. He ruled like a spider in the centre of the web. And then there were all these different parallel systems: the Revolutionary Committees, who were basically the neighbourhood thugs; and then there were the government which sometimes had policies which were then countermanded by the Revolutionary Committees; and then you would have a justice system where the minister of justice, Abdul Jalil, who is now the interim president, he would say something should happen and then the Revolutionary Committees or maybe Mutassim Gaddafi, would do something completely against it.

So there really was no state, as such, and that weakness of the state and the institutions, that wasn't just Gaddafi – if you look back to King Idris, who Gaddafi overthrew in 1969, the institutions of the state were very weak then as well. And, you know, they used to call King Idris 'the reluctant monarch' because he just didn't really seem to want to rule at all. And if he was going to rule, he would really much rather it was in Benghazi and the east. He wasn't

that interested in what happens in Tripoli and in the west. And so you can see this long, this long tradition. And so it's not surprising that we see these people who are trying to run Libya now not actually making that great a job of it.

But what did we expect? Did we expect to go from dictatorship to democracy overnight? I think if we did, then we were dreaming. Of course it's not like that. And what we are seeing at the moment is the legacy of the Gaddafi years and the inherent problems of the Libyan state.

One of the things I did when writing the book was, one of the glories of writing a book which is different from television, is that in television you're always very focused on what you're doing – you're going to get the story, you're going to go and do interviews and do your filming and you come back and you edit your piece and you send it out that night. Research for the book, I could wander about a bit. And that's when you get to find out all sorts of interesting things because you get chatting to people.

And one of the things I did was I wandered into the medina in the middle of Tripoli and I got chatting to an older guy called Mohammed who was the first person you come across in the metal-workers souk. So he makes, you know, those lovely copper half-moons that they put on minarets. And I don't speak Arabic, but luckily for me he had an English-speaking friend sitting with him. So I sat down and started to chat, and he started to tell me his story. And I began to realize that his story was the story of Libya. He told me how in 1967, he took part in riots in the medina to drive out the Jews. And he was a bit ashamed of it now, telling me about it, but he said, you know, 'Yes we grew up with the Jews, but you know, the Six-Day War, King Idris did not take part in the way that he felt that, you know, they should take part.' And he was angry about that, and so he got involved in that, in driving the Jews out of the souk.

And then when Gaddafi took over in 1969, he was thrilled because he saw King Idris as weak and leaving the country behind and so it wasn't modernizing. And he looked to Egypt and Nasser, as so many people did in those days. He thought, there's a strong leader. There's a real pan-Arabist. There's someone who speaks for my generation. And Gaddafi, he thought – fantastic – now finally my country is going to take part in this modernization of the Arab world. So he went out and celebrated in the main square, Green Square as Gaddafi named it, Martyrs' Square as they call it now.

And then he began to change his mind. And he said, well, in the 70s, on the way home from work, he would sometimes find that they'd erected a gibbet in

the street and someone was hanging. And he said, 'You know, I think Gaddafi was just hanging the people he didn't like.' And so he began to have his doubts. And then there was the day that he got a message that his assistant had been seized by men in the souk. And so he came rushing up to see what was going on, and then he got seized too by these men in plainclothes who'd surrounded the whole area. Mohammed spent the next 11 years in the military. It was the press-gang. They just came and grabbed the men. He was sent to Tajikistan for military training. It was minus five. He'd never been through anything like that before. He ended up in Chad, fighting the war in Chad, one of the world's most pointless wars, which Gaddafi started – you know, you may remember, the Aouzou Strip, that sort of 60 kilometer wide strip of desert – he said it was something that Libya doesn't need more of, it's a bit of desert. And that was, Mohammed had to do that. And he was on the anti-aircraft batteries the night in 1986 when the Americans bombed Bab al-Aziziya, Gaddafi's compound.

So I realized that this, Mohammed's story, was the story of Libya under Gaddafi. And he told me, he said, you know, 'All my life journalists have been coming and talking to me and asking me questions because I'm the first person you come across in the metal-workers' souk.' He said, 'But I've never been able to speak to anyone before because I was afraid to speak, and I thought it was better to say nothing than to lie.' So of course I was very pleased about that. And then he said, 'What's the name of that bloke from the BBC, the one with the white hair?' I said, 'John Simpson.' He said, 'I didn't speak to him.' I said, 'Oh, that was good.' [Laughter] So Libyans are quite well aware of the world outside.

And of course one of the things which had happened in recent years is how sophisticated Libyans have become. So while the government, Gaddafi's government, didn't change, was completely sclerotic, Libyans were doing exactly the same as everyone else, which is watching satellite television, and, you know, many people would travel to the Gulf and as we all know many Libyans live here or in the States, and many people have family members in other parts of the world. And if you'll excuse me for telling an anecdote which I've told in this forum before, but for people who weren't here last time I was here on a panel talking about Libya, the best example I had of that discontinuity between the Gaddafi regime and the people was when I was first in Benghazi during the revolution, when Gaddafi was still in power in Tripoli, and there was a graffiti which read, 'Gaddafi: You are the weakest link. Good-bye'.

It would have been nice, maybe, if things could have changed differently. Because obviously, the kind of turmoil you have in revolution, and the lives lost in revolution – we don't even know how many lives have been lost in the Libyan revolution – make it very difficult. There's been a lot of destruction of property, of human lives, of people's whole centre of gravity. And I think that there were many people who hoped that Saif al-Gaddafi would be able to bring reform to Libya. And he is a very, I find him a very intriguing character, and I tried to look into him for the book, and I ended up feeling quite mixed about him.

Because on the one hand, well, I found a document, which was... he had sued *The Daily Telegraph* for libel, and he won because they had accused him of all sorts of things that there was no proof that he'd actually done. But he had written a document which was his personal statement about himself, which was just fascinating as an insight into his character. Because he said, he was very annoyed that people should think that he was particularly privileged, because he said no, no, no, I'm just a normal student – he was a student in Vienna at the time – that I have the same interests as any other student. I'm interested in football and painting, and keeping falcons, and looking after my pet tigers – just like anybody else. He said, I don't have any particular privileges. He said, yeah, it is true that I've got the Schönbrunn Zoo in Vienna to look after my pet tigers while I'm here in Vienna, but you know, they were very keen to have them, and it's very nice because it means I can go and play with them whenever I want. So on the one hand, you have that princeling, that person with that incredible sense of entitlement.

And on the other hand, I think you have somebody who really did want to try and bring reform and change, and who worked on a constitution and got serious people to work with him on changing the constitution, and who spearheaded a de-radicalisation process in the prisons for when they arrested the jihadi opposition to Gaddafi, which I will talk a little bit more about in a minute. The de-radicalisation process that went on with those jihadi prisoners is seen as a model. And those prisoners, through a long and complex process, ended up writing a document rejecting violence as a form of political expression. And I think that he was completely genuine in trying to do that. And so do they, so do those people who were very fervently and ardently against the Gaddafi rule.

But by the time we got to last year, Saif's efforts at reform were already failing, and he was already losing what power he had. And there was a lot of rivalry between him and Mutassim, one of the other brothers who was a real hard-liner, and who tried to undo all the reforms that Saif tried to do. And so I

think that that, the chance for that as a reform that might have succeeded had gone. And of course when we look around the region, this idea that you can get reform through the son after the father, it doesn't look very good as a model at the moment, does it. Bashar al-Assad? Didn't really work out, did it. Gamal Mubarak? Well, nobody was going to go for that one. So I think that that... I think that in the end that was wishful thinking.

I'm going to talk a little bit about British policy because obviously the British, to some extent, hitched their wagon to Saif. And I don't think that was, you know – I understand why they did that. I don't think that that was necessarily completely wrong. But Gaddafi's zig-zag is an extraordinary thing in history, isn't it. To go from being 'Mad Dog of the Middle East', which is of course what Ronald Reagan called him in the years when he was, you know, buying arms for the IRA and sponsoring any kind of rebel movement that would try and fight any government that the Americans favoured. 'Mad Dog of the Middle East' to new best friend, meeting Blair with the 'deal in the desert'. And then back to public enemy number one in the last year. So it's quite an extraordinary policy shift that we see in the West and particularly in Britain. And of course that's what makes the general public very cynical about policy, about foreign policy. And of course it's easy to criticize with hindsight, but there were big mistakes made.

And if we look at what happened with the jihadi opposition, by the time it got to the 1990s, the only real opposition to Gaddafi that hadn't been crushed was the jihadi opposition, and obviously that went at a time when the idea of jihad was gaining currency all over the Muslim world, and Libyans went to fight with the mujahideen in Afghanistan. And they failed, as everybody failed, in their attempts at overthrowing Gaddafi. And then many of them went back. And some very significant figures in what became the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group knew Bin Laden extremely well. Sami al-Saadi, whose story I tell in the book, was an emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. He met Bin Laden on at least five occasions, and he knew Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban, very well.

Now, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group never joined Al-Qaeda, and there's no evidence that they ever carried out any attacks on Westerners. They were purely focused on trying to overthrow Gaddafi. But, you know, when intelligence agencies and foreign policy people here and in America looked, they saw allies of Al-Qaeda. Now, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group were very against 9/11; they knew something was coming up, they knew Bin Laden was going to do something, and they – I'm told, by members and former members – they didn't want him to attack anywhere in the West because they

knew that would make their life difficult because they were living in Afghanistan, and they knew there would be a war and they would have to flee. And sure enough, that's what happened.

And then the main members of the Islamic Fighting Group ended up fleeing all over the world: Sami al-Saadi went to Iran, and then he went to Pakistan, and then he went to Malaysia – it's actually fascinating, when you find out all these things, all the fake passports and so on, and trailing a wife and four children. He gets to Malaysia and then he thinks, you know, I'd really better put these children in school. So he tries to put the children in school, he tries to enrol for the university, and they look at the passport and go, 'Hmm, don't think so.'

And so, he then – they then ended up, he and Belhaj, who's a significant figure in Libya now, they ended up trying to be merchants in Guangzhou, in southeastern China, which is quite extraordinary. And it was when Sami was flying to Hong Kong one time he was picked up by the Hong Kong police, who looked at his fake Moroccan passport and said, 'No, no, no, we don't think so,' and made inquiries. They made inquiries of the British, the Americans, and Libyans, and that was when the CIA and MI6 cooperated with the Hong Kong authorities and with the Libyans, and through extraordinary rendition he was taken back to Libya. And yes, he was tortured. And he, according to his testimony as he gave it to me, people from... British and American officials, he doesn't know who they were, did come and see him. He said he was not able to tell them that he was being tortured because, he said, there was always a Libyan guard just looking at him.

And then he also tells the story of when, very soon after he landed back in Libya, Moussa Koussa, who as you will remember, was – in Libya they call him 'Gaddafi's black box' – but he was the head of intelligence at one point, and he had been the head of the People's Bureau here at the time of the killing of Yvonne Fletcher. And he was the point man for MI6 and the CIA and so on. He walked into Sami's cell and said, Sami, you know, the world is very small now. Now, after 9/11, I can pick up the phone and call my friends in MI6 or the CIA and get all the information I need about you and your group. I always find something very chilling about that, the idea of this man walking in like that.

And that – you know, the policy that led to extraordinary rendition of Belhaj and Sami al-Saadi, that's the kind of policy that does come back to bite you, and it's coming back to bite now because of course both of those men are suing the British government for their role in extraordinary rendition. George

[Walker] Bush and Tony Blair claimed the credit for Gaddafi giving up his weapons of mass destruction, which was of course also part of his rehabilitation. But in fact the negotiations for that started much earlier, under the Clinton administration, because Gaddafi had realised for some time that he had to get out of this cleft stick he was in, and that he could no longer... you know he no longer wanted to be the pariah of the world. But what that meant was that you ended up with a policy that basically swept on one side everything that had happened before.

And one of the things I found when I first went to Libya was that, I went to the north courthouse in Benghazi and saw all of these pictures of men on the walls, the martyrs, and learned that many of them were the victims of the Abu Salim massacre. And I'm sure many of you here know about the Abu Salim massacre. I didn't know about it when I first got there. The Abu Salim massacre – in 1996 there were many political prisoners, many Islamist political prisoners, in the prison, Abu Salim, in Tripoli. And their conditions were appalling – people were dying of TB, they were dying of hunger, they had... they were almost naked. As for trials, and any kind of judicial system – nothing. And they rioted, and they killed a guard in that riot. And then Abdullah Sanussi, who is Gaddafi's brother-in-law, went to the prison to negotiate with the prisoners, and a negotiation was done, and an agreement was made that some of their demands would be met. One of the main demands was that prisoners who needed medical treatment should be taken to hospital. So the prisoners who needed medical treatment were put on a bus, taken out. The others were told to go to a courtyard, and then soldiers were mounted on the roof, all around the courtyard, and they gunned down every single man. And they went to the bus, and they pulled people off, and they killed every single one of them. 1,270 men killed. In 1996, June 1996.

So when I heard about this, I thought, this is more important than I know. And I asked to see a couple of the families, the relatives. And so the translator I was working with took me to meet the families. And I walked into a room, and instead of there just being a couple of families, there were about 25 or 30 people, women on one side, men on the other, all round the walls, and each of them was holding up a picture of the family member they had lost – the husband, the brother, the son. And I just walked in, and I thought, okay, there's something really, really important about this. And also I thought, as a journalist, what am I going to do? Because, you know, working for television, I can't get everybody's story, so what I did was I asked everybody just to say the name of the family member they'd lost, and we filmed that, so at least we acknowledged everybody. And then I asked the women to nominate

somebody to tell her story and the men to nominate someone. And a little old man came forward with a dark red fez and huge black-rimmed glasses, and he sat down and said, it was my brother-in-law, and he said, every two months, I would go to Tripoli with my sister, his brother-in-law's wife, and the two children, to take toiletries and clothes and food for him. He said, they wouldn't let us see him, but they said you can leave the things at the gate. He said, they did that for 14 years before they told us he was dead. I thought, you know, that takes a particular kind of cruelty, doesn't it. I mean, I've worked in so many countries where people disappear, where people are tortured – but never in a place where they don't tell you, where they let the family keep that hope alive.

And I, I sort of became ashamed at that point because I thought that in the media we turned Gaddafi into a buffoon because there were so many things about him which were funny. There's no question, he was eccentric, he was bizarre, he dressed in all those weird ways. There's lots of things to laugh about. But there were lots of things to not laugh about. And I felt, you know, Libya was pretty close, it wasn't North Korea but it wasn't far off, and yet I felt that we should have known and we should have made more effort to know. And I also thought that Abu Salim, for all that it was so much earlier, in 1996, that was one of the main reasons that the revolution happened. And also, that that should have factored much more into Western governments' decisions when it came to policy. Because when it came to the 'deal in the desert' and so on, we may all have forgotten or never really known about that, but Libyans never forgot, and never will forget.

The NATO campaign – how are we doing on time? I'll talk a little bit about the NATO campaign. It worked. One of the things about the revolution in Libya was at the beginning, when I was first there in the east, everybody was full of how they were going to do this themselves and how they didn't want outside intervention, and so on. And then, you all saw the pictures on the television of all those young men shooting into the air, and so on – and I have to say, with all respect to Libyan friends here, they are the most rubbish guerilla army that I have ever seen. They were hopeless. I came across one young man, he had a mortar tube, and he came up to me and he said, 'A bit of my weapon is missing.' I said, 'I'm terribly sorry, which bit?' He said, 'I don't know. I said, so what are you going to do?' He said, 'Well, I suppose I have to wait until I get the right bit.' I said, 'I think you probably do.' And at this point I said, 'How old are you?' He said seventeen. And then I heard myself say, and I've obviously become an old trout in my old age, I said, 'Does your mother know you're here?' To which he replied, 'Yes, she's very proud of me.' And I said, 'Well

she won't be very proud of you if you go into battle with a mortar tube with a bit missing.'

So, they were – I don't have any doubt that if it hadn't been for the NATO intervention, they would have been pushed back to Ajdabiya, Benghazi, Tabruk, and you would have had a huge outflow of refugees to Egypt. And a lot of people would have been killed, because I think Gaddafi meant it when he said, zenga zenga, we're going to go alleyway by alleyway killing people. I really do believe that.

But it's quite clear to me, and I think to most people in policy circles who I've spoken to about it, that the Russians and the Chinese certainly feel that the Western nations over-interpreted the mandate, the UN mandate, and did not expect, and did not want, that kind of armed intervention. And the people who are paying for that now are probably the Syrians. Because I don't think that the Russians and the Chinese are going to sign up to anything like that again for a very, very long time. So you can argue that Syrians are paying for Libyans' freedom. I think Libyans might like to have a little think about that when they work out what they're going to do in the coming months and years.

At the end of the book, I try and look forward a little bit. I use a quotation from Auden at the beginning of the last chapter. I love this quotation, it says: 'They wept and quarrelled. Freedom was so wild'. And I think that that's exactly what's happening in Libya at the moment. Because of the weak state and institutions, as we talked about in the beginning, there is no one centre of power. So power is diffused all over the place, between the NTC, the cabinet – which may or may not be dismissed – between the different militia who are sometimes fighting each other.

And because there's no political tradition of sitting down and negotiating and compromising and building and finding out a way forward, it's – that's not people's first instinct. I spoke to one young woman who said to me, you know, 'Our problem is that we've all got a little Gaddafi in our heads.' And I quite like that as an idea. You know, people protest, they turn to violence. It's very hard to work out how to build things. And yet, they should be able to do it. There's only six million Libyans. They're rich. They've got oil. They've got gas. They're highly educated. They should be able to do it. They don't have half of the problems that Egypt has with its 80 million population, its terrible poverty, its incredibly complex and totally atrophied structures of government in the military.

You know, also there's a problem with Libyans expecting to be given things, expecting to be, you know, given money, because there's no tradition of

taxation and representation and all those good things. And then you have the divisions, not only between the different towns, and the regions, but between those with a secular vision and those with a religious vision. We've also seen the out-workings across the region, and of course one of the casualties of the Libyan revolution is what's happened in Mali, the coup in Mali. Because the Tuareg uprising in the north of Mali took place because Tuareg were given weapons by Gaddafi to fight for him, and now they've fled over the border incredibly heavily armed and taken over the northern part of Mali. So that's a destabilization across West Africa, because there's refugees fleeing into Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.

I suppose the last thing I would say is that, so, we come back to the question, was it worth it? Many people might say, God, you know everybody was so enthusiastic, especially you journalists, you were cheerleaders for the revolution, and actually look now – it's not so good after all. What I would say is that change had to come. It was going to come one way or another, Gaddafi wasn't going to live forever, and that these problems I would see as Gaddafi's legacy rather than the problem caused by the revolution. I think you have to look back and see, and try and understand why this has happened. But I do think it's an extremely rocky road ahead. And I also think that it's entirely up to Libyans. I don't think that there's that much that the outside world can do. I think it's up to Libyans to make it work. Thank you.