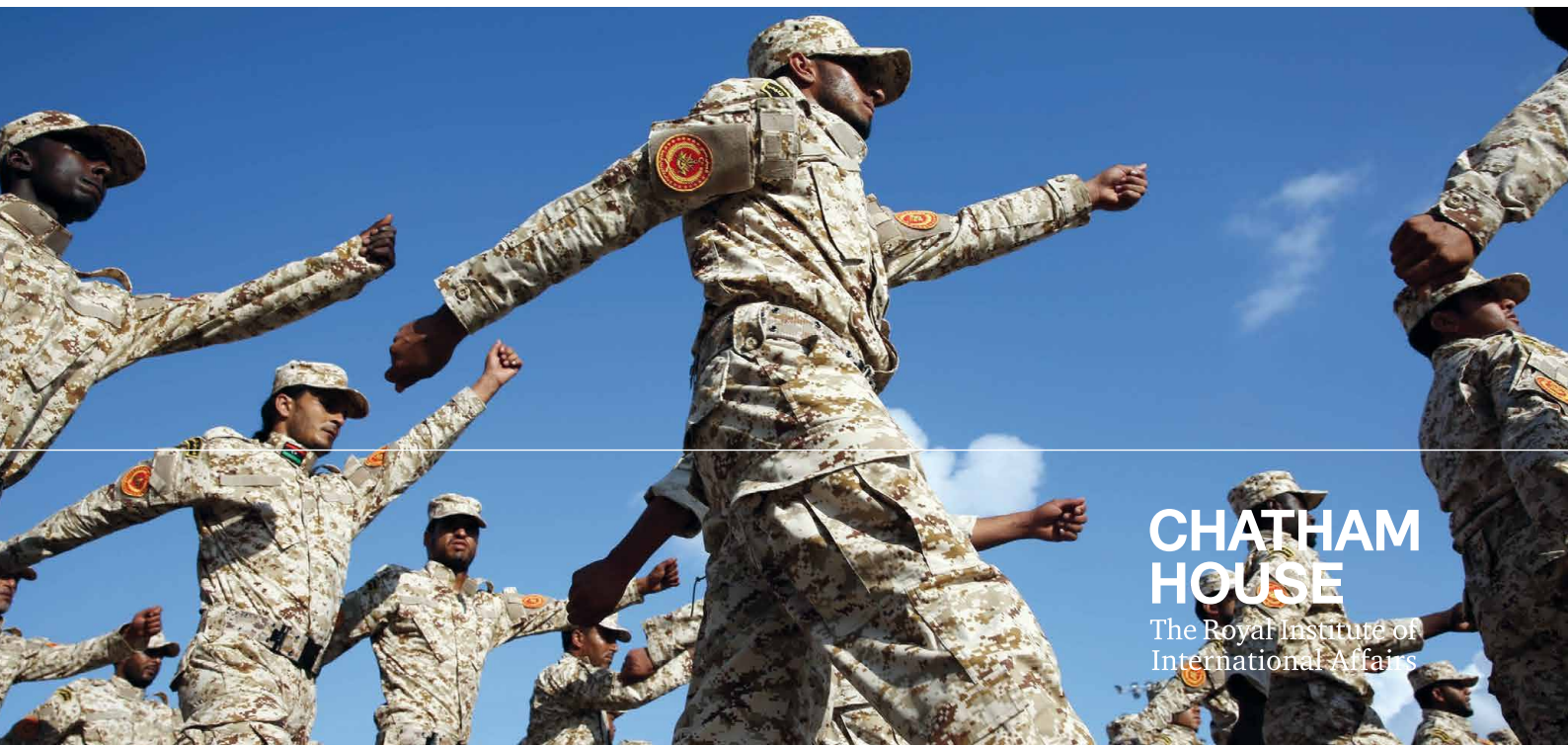


Research Paper

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UK International Defence Engagement Strategy Lessons from Bassingbourn



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Summary

- In 2011 the United Kingdom was instrumental in supporting the popular uprising in Libya that led to the downfall of the Gaddafi regime. Thereafter, the British government was keen to assist with post-conflict stabilization to support Libya's democratic transition.
- Central to this stabilization effort was an ambitious plan, under the auspices of its new International Defence Engagement Strategy, to train a new Libyan army at Bassingbourn Barracks in Cambridgeshire. The training programme, implemented in June 2014, was beset with challenges almost from the outset, and was abruptly terminated less than five months later after a number of trainees who had absconded from the barracks were arrested and charged in connection with serious sexual assaults in Cambridge city centre.
- Libya had meanwhile begun a descent into violent chaos, and the overall assistance package for the country fell victim to the pace of political developments that it had little prospect of influencing. In the absence of effective political oversight from Libya, the Bassingbourn programme became an isolated endeavour and its recruits came to realize that they were a forgotten force with no future in their home country.
- The continuing instability in Libya and the failure at Bassingbourn have come to symbolize the shortcomings of the United Kingdom's defence engagement strategy. Although entirely plausible in theory, the strategy has proved problematic in practice.
- Bassingbourn also acted as a 'wake-up call' for the British Army. Despite a long history of training indigenous forces and a new operating model that heralds defence engagement as a major output, the Army was unprepared for this programme and lacked the necessary understanding to deliver its new role.
- This paper makes the case that the practical application of the government's defence engagement strategy lacks commitment and coherence; and that the British Army, the involvement of which is integral to the strategy, is not currently set for success in this regard.
- The Bassingbourn case study produces some important lessons. In Whitehall, there must be coordinated and cross-government commitment before engagement begins; on implementation, stabilizing local politics must be the primary focus. For the British Army, understanding socio-cultural dynamics is crucial; engagement itself must be tailored to both the training audience and the needs of the specific security environment.

Introduction

In 2011 the United Kingdom was instrumental in supporting the popular uprising in Libya that eventually brought an end to the dictatorship of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Thereafter, it was keen to assist with post-conflict stabilization to support Libya's democratic transition. Central to this assistance programme was an ambitious plan to train a new Libyan army at Bassingbourn Barracks in Cambridgeshire.¹ Although conducted under the auspices of the government's new International Defence Engagement Strategy, this flagship project ended in failure. The training programme, which had been beset with serious difficulties from its outset, was abruptly terminated in late 2014 after a group of trainees absconded from the barracks and a number of them were arrested and charged in connection with serious sexual assaults in Cambridge city centre.²

With Libya now descending into state failure, Bassingbourn can be seen to symbolize the shortcomings of the United Kingdom's defence engagement strategy when this is applied in an ad hoc nature and without the necessary level of commitment. Furthermore, Bassingbourn has acted as a salutary lesson for the British Army, which found itself unprepared for its expected role despite a long history of training what it terms indigenous – or local – forces, and in view of the fact its new operating model, 'Army 2020', envisages a third of its future output focused on defence engagement.³

The aim of this paper is to explore why the Bassingbourn initiative ended in what some commentators have called a 'heroic failure',⁴ and to identify how the lessons could shape future UK defence engagement programmes. It highlights two specific points: first, how the British government's application of its defence engagement strategy lacks commitment and coherence, despite the importance ascribed to it; and second, how the British Army needs a more effective and focused approach if it is to deliver its part of the defence engagement strategy.

The paper recommends that the British government should heed more fully its own stated commitment to a defence engagement strategy involving coordinated effort across the political, social and security arenas. It further recommends that the British Army must fully understand its training audience and have specialist teams properly prepared for their role before conducting future defence engagement activity.

Context

By early 2012 NATO's campaign in Libya was being heralded by some as a model intervention.⁵ Operation Unified Protector, conducted between March and October 2011, had seemingly achieved its aim of protecting civilians in Libya, helped bring an end to Gaddafi's regime and ultimately facilitated the country's first popular elections in more than four decades. Since the latter part of 2012, however, Libya has descended ever further into violent chaos, and towards state failure.⁶ The situation is particularly embarrassing for the United Kingdom, which had been a key proponent of military intervention and which had pledged to support post-conflict reconstruction. Moreover, much of its post-conflict stabilization effort was conducted under the auspices of the new government strategy

¹ Farmer, B. (2013), 'Libyan Troops to Train in Britain', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 2013.

² Stephen, C. and MacAskill, E. (2014), 'Cameron's plan to train Libyans had makings of disaster from the Start', *Guardian*, 5 November 2014.

³ General Sir Nicholas Carter, 'The Future of the British Army: How the Army must Change to Serve Britain in a Volatile World', speech at Chatham House, 17 February 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-british-army-how-army-must-change-serve-britain-volatile-world>.

⁴ Author's telephone interview with Sir Richard Dalton, British Ambassador to Libya 1999–2002, London, 3 July 2015.

⁵ Daalder, I. and Starridis, J. G. (2012), 'NATO's Victory in Libya', *Foreign Affairs*, 91(2): pp. 2–7.

⁶ Kuperman, A. J. (2015), 'Obama's Libya Debacle', *Foreign Affairs*, 94(2): pp. 66–74.

of international defence engagement. While designed to avoid overseas entanglements such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, the defence engagement programme in Libya appears to have produced equally unfavourable results.

Defence engagement is a much used but rather general term. The government launched its International Defence Engagement Strategy in 2013, amid a perceived public reluctance to see British armed forces – especially ground troops – employed in controversial foreign interventions.⁷ While the National Security Strategy at that time still envisaged an international role for the United Kingdom,⁸ defence engagement set out how this can sometimes be achieved without the direct use of force.

The government launched its International Defence Engagement Strategy in 2013, amid a perceived public reluctance to see British armed forces – especially ground troops – employed in controversial foreign interventions.

The government defines defence engagement as ‘the means by which we use our defence assets and activities short of combat operations to achieve influence’.⁹ Much of the focus is on overseas capacity-building. From the perspective of the Ministry of Defence, this can involve assisting local security forces through various training and mentoring programmes. It is important to note that defence engagement is designed to achieve much more than just military aims, and government guidance accordingly emphasizes cross-government integration as an underlying principle.¹⁰

Bassingbourn

Among the most visible aspects of the British government’s post-conflict assistance package for Libya was the training mission at Bassingbourn Barracks in Cambridgeshire. During a visit to Tripoli in early 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron had pledged more support for Libya’s newly elected transitional administration. Specifically, the Libyan government requested assistance in controlling the numerous militias that had come to prominence at the time of the military intervention and which were now waging violent turf wars across the country. At the Lough Erne G8 summit in June 2013, Cameron announced a new Security Compact for Libya, also involving Italy, France, Germany and the United States.¹¹ At the heart of the compact was an undertaking to establish a new Libyan army – termed the General Purpose Force. The intention was that this new force would allow the Libyan government to assert its own authority, protect the country’s elected officials and institutions, and compel the militias to demobilize and disarm.¹² After August 2013, when tribal militias raided a US training camp near Tripoli, the countries engaged in the compact agreed to train the new force outside Libya. For the United Kingdom, Bassingbourn Barracks, which had recently closed as a British Army training centre, offered the best affordable mix of infrastructure, security and logistical support.¹³

⁷ Winnett, R. (2013), ‘Syria Crisis: No to War; Blow to Cameron’, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 2013.

⁸ ‘The UK must use all its national capabilities in order to build prosperity, extend its influence in the world and strengthen its security’. UK Government (2010), *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, London, p. 9, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61936/national-security-strategy.pdf.

⁹ UK Government (2013), *International Defence Engagement Strategy*, p. 1, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/73171/defence_engagement_strategy.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ UK Government (2013), *Annual Report on the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review*, London, pp. 21–22, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/267808/Annual-report-on-NSS-and-SDSR.pdf.

¹² Wehrey, F. (2013), ‘Modest Mission? The US Plan to Build a Libyan Army’, *Foreign Affairs*, 4 November 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2013-11-04/modest-mission>.

¹³ The training facility at Bassingbourn had been ‘mothballed’ under the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review.

Within these specific parameters, options to train the Libyan forces in a third country (such as Jordan) were considered less favourable compared with Bassingbourn. The training costs incurred (subsequently stated to be some £17.2 million) were to be met by the Libyan government.¹⁴

After a series of delays attributed to the complexities of confirmatory negotiations, funding issues and recruit selection, 328 Libyan trainees arrived at Bassingbourn on 10 June 2014. They were to complete a 24-week training programme conducted by 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland (known as 3 SCOTS). Although part of the then 4th Mechanized Brigade, which had just been assigned responsibility for defence engagement activities in North Africa, members of 3 SCOTS were not deeply immersed in North African affairs and received little or no specific training for this assignment. Indeed, the majority of their preparation time before the recruits' arrival was taken up by work to enable the reopening of Bassingbourn Barracks.

Although good progress was made in some aspects of the training programme, particularly in developing the recruits' basic military skills, the project did not proceed smoothly overall. Training was halted in July and again in August when the recruits refused to continue, citing concerns over wages, the political uncertainty in Libya and their future employment.¹⁵ The situation escalated from September, as worsening political conditions in Libya further unsettled the trainees, resulting in ill-discipline and increased apathy with regard to their training. The most serious breakdown, however, came on 26 October, when a group of trainees absconded from the barracks. Later that evening five recruits were arrested in Cambridge following allegations of serious sexual assault.¹⁶ Meeting on 28 October, the National Security Council decided to end the project with immediate effect. Prime Minister Cameron also ordered a Ministry of Defence enquiry into the conduct of the training programme itself. By 7 November the remaining Libyan recruits had been returned to Libya, and at the time of writing this paper their whereabouts and current situation were unknown.

The Ministry of Defence report on Bassingbourn was delivered to parliament at the end of 2014. While the findings acknowledged that the training did not achieve its aim of delivering a new force for Libya, the report largely praised the UK part of the operation and blamed the project's shortcomings on the Libyan side. Specifically, it commended the cross-government commitment and the role played by the British Army, and concluded that problems arising from the trainees' background and the deteriorating situation in Libya were largely responsible for derailing the project.¹⁷

Lessons

Based on an analysis of Britain's assistance package for Libya and its centrepiece activity at Bassingbourn, this paper makes the case that the practical application of the government's defence engagement strategy lacks commitment and coherence; and that the British Army, the involvement of which is integral to defence engagement, is not currently set for success in this regard. This section aims to draw out four major lessons from the Bassingbourn case study. Each lesson is examined from a strategy and a practical perspective to show how, if implementation is to achieve its goals, future

¹⁴ Farmer, B. (2014), 'Libya Still Owes Britain £14m for Army Training Fiasco', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 November 2014.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Lieutenant Colonel Adrian Reilly, former commanding officer, 3 SCOTS, 26 June 2015, Army HQ Andover. His direct experience informs this section of the paper.

¹⁶ In May 2015 two of the Libyan recruits were sentenced to 12 years in prison, having been convicted of raping a man in Cambridge at the time of the break-out; three others received lesser custodial sentences, having been convicted of sexual assaults on women.

¹⁷ UK Ministry of Defence (2014), *Summary Conclusions of the Report into the Training of the Libyan General Purpose Force at Bassingbourn Barracks 11 June to 7 November 2014*, accessed via <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/business-papers/commons/deposited-papers/?max=1000&page=2#toggle-26>.

programmes will require greater coherence from the government and greater understanding on the part of the British Army.

Political stabilization

The first lesson evident from Britain's Libya project concerns the failure to stabilize the political situation following the removal of the Gaddafi regime, and the concomitant impact on the wider institution-building effort. In the context of the political instability that developed after the 2012 elections, Libya's transitional government never developed a practical plan concerning the role and purpose for the new force. Not least because personalities in the post-election administration came and went very rapidly,¹⁸ civilian officials never developed likely missions and tasks for the General Purpose Force or even a basic operating concept. As the government in Tripoli descended into political paralysis, and with their country in a state of monumental upheaval, it became clear to the Bassingbourn trainees that no one in Libya was particularly focused on their future. The Bassingbourn instructors understood early on that the central motivation of the otherwise disparate band of recruits was a desire to return to a democratic Libya as the sole and legitimate security force.¹⁹ When it became obvious that this was unlikely, the recruits grew restless and ambivalent about their training.

The British assistance strategy for Libya failed to address this instability in post-Gaddafi politics. By the time government planners began developing a stabilization programme, analysts had already highlighted the dire political situation and the dangers this represented.²⁰ Gaddafi's *jamahiriya* (a 'massocracy', or political system in which the people govern themselves without the apparatus of a modern state) had outlawed formal political representation and associated structures.²¹ With no bureaucratic expertise available to inform the building of a viable state, there was a high risk that external stabilization efforts would be undermined by Libya's inherent political weakness. This was a situation entirely reflective of that encountered in Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003. With this in mind, it was critical that the first step in reconstruction should focus on rebuilding capacity in Libya's ministries and departments of state. Only once a degree of good governance had been developed could reform of the security sector occur.²² Despite such warnings, Britain's strategy lacked the coherence required to support the building of a stable government of national accord that could provide the sound political basis for subsequent reform. It seemed that the United Kingdom had again participated in an armed intervention without a clear strategy for what the political end state might look like, and how that state might be achieved.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom's assistance programme to Libya was slow to get going. David Cameron's announcement at the G8 conference in June 2013 predated the official Security, Justice and Defence (SJD) Programme for Libya. The drafting of this programme of assistance by the cross-government Stabilisation Unit only began in earnest towards the end of 2013 after British stabilization experts had deployed to Libya. There followed a painful, nine-month period

¹⁸ During Brigadier Hugh Blackman's tenure as the senior British military representative in Libya in 2013–14, the country had three prime ministers (one for a week), two presidents and two defence ministers. At one point all three prime ministers considered themselves to be the legitimate head of the government. Author's telephone Interview with Brigadier Hugh Blackman, Shrivenham, 31 July 2015.

¹⁹ Interview, Reilly.

²⁰ 'If the government is unable to take back control of the security sector, Libya may well be headed to a failed state scenario'. Gaub, F. (2013), *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Libya: Reviewing Operation Unified Protector*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, p. 28, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub1161.pdf>.

²¹ Vandewalle, D. (2012), *A History of Modern Libya*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96–136.

²² Gaub, F. (2014), 'A Libyan Recipe for Disaster', *Survival*, 56(1): pp. 101–20.

of simultaneous design and delivery.²³ Engagement with Libyan officials was therefore minimal, and, given the rapidly changing political situation in Libya, had little effect. As a result, the assistance package for Libya was way behind from the outset, and fell victim to the pace of political developments that it had little prospect of influencing. In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, without effective political oversight from Libya, the Bassingbourn training programme became an isolated endeavour. As Libya sank further into socio-political turmoil, the Bassingbourn recruits realized they were a forgotten force with no future in their home country.

For its part, the British Army was also at fault in having failed to draw on past experience. The need for effective political oversight during mentoring missions is a lesson from military history, and one it has readily experienced in the recent past. Previous mentoring missions in the Arab world have highlighted how regime leadership can impose checks and balances to keep Western influence at a minimal or acceptably low level.²⁴ Experience has also shown that Arab states routinely lack a nationally defined security strategy, and this may lead to two related outcomes: a blurring of purpose across the security sector, and armed forces without clearly defined missions and tasks.²⁵ The British Army had first-hand experience of these issues during the implementation of the security sector reform programme in Iraq. There, the very purpose behind the new Iraqi security forces was frequently undermined by sectarian initiatives emanating from the then commander-in-chief, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who created parallel reporting chains and ‘praetorian guards’ responsible only to him.²⁶

Despite the warning signals from history and its pride in its record of training indigenous forces,²⁷ in this instance the British Army spent little time in background research and applying previous lessons to its task. Had some form of pre-mission research been undertaken, planners could have identified how political instability in Tripoli could undermine the training in Bassingbourn, and modified or redesigned the programme appropriately. For instance, a more low-level training package, aimed at building leadership and teamwork, could have been implemented while stabilization efforts focused on developing ministerial oversight in Libya in readiness for more far-reaching security sector reform once these elements were in place. In the view of one well-placed observer, however, the problem was compounded by reluctance on the part of UK Ministry of Defence officials to highlight any potential or actual difficulties in the programme.²⁸ In the view of this observer, middle management appeared to prioritize projecting an image of calm over raising any issues with the plan: Bassingbourn was more about looking busy and demonstrating wide utility than about Libya’s post-conflict reconstruction.

Social and cultural dynamics

The second lesson from the Libya assistance programme concerns the British Army’s capacity to interact effectively with a non-Western army. The majority of 3 SCOTS’ preparation time for the Bassingbourn mission was spent on logistics and planning. The unit had to deploy from its

²³ Interview, Blackman.

²⁴ DeAtkine, N. B. (2013), ‘Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes’, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 17(1): p. 9.

²⁵ Gaub, F. (2014), ‘After the Spring: Reforming Arab Armies’, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, pp. 4–12, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1232.pdf>.

²⁶ Robinson, L. (2008), *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*, New York: PublicAffairs, p. 156–57.

²⁷ General Sir Peter Wall, ‘Defence Engagement: The British Army’s Role in Building Security and Stability Overseas’, speech at Chatham House, 12 March 2014, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140312Defence%20Engagement.pdf.

²⁸ Author’s interview with Cabinet Office Operation Vocate desk officer, London, 28 July 2015.

base in Inverness, resurrect Bassingbourn Barracks and help design the actual training programme. Little time was available for the key tasks of developing cultural awareness and language training. Moreover, British Army planners did not provide these essential elements as part of any coordinated pre-mission training programme. As a result, British Army personnel at Bassingbourn lacked an inherent understanding of their training audience.²⁹ This led frequently to confusion between trainers and trainees, and ultimately to friction and disrespect. For instance, the Libyan trainees did not understand why the British thought it acceptable for officers to complete the same training alongside their soldiers. Trainers, for their part, became disrespectful towards Libyan officers who by custom ate before their men (which ran counter to the British Army ethos whereby ‘officers eat last’). As another example, the Libyans did not recognize the need for fieldcraft lessons and room inspections – basic building blocks of Western military training – as these activities were contrary to their perception of what soldiers do. A major step-change in the programme’s effectiveness came with the arrival of four Jordanian army instructors in the last month of the course. These instructors acted as a bridge between Western training aspirations and the Libyans’ own military expectations. Bassingbourn’s commanding officer described them as a ‘force multiplier’,³⁰ but their impact was too little too late.

The British Army realized that training soldiers from a different culture required a different approach. Bassingbourn staff found their training audience responded better to more unorthodox and less mainstream instructors. Indeed, better results were often achieved by those not necessarily wedded to Western military teaching methods. Additionally, training methodologies required adjustment. The traditional habit of conducting ‘hot debriefs’ after each activity, where good points and bad points are aired for intended collective benefit, ran counter to the honour/shame dimension of Arab military culture. The British Army further recognized that a more focused, hands-on approach to training was required, as the Libyans sometimes found its deliberate and detailed approach too slow and too safe.

After the ‘Arab Spring’, analysts were emphasizing the unique position in Libyan politics and society long played by the military, and recommended that efforts to encourage the Libyan army out of politics must also ensure that Libyan society was included in the process.

Understanding the training audience’s social and cultural dynamics is a clear lesson from previous military mentoring missions. For instance, the avoidance of embarrassment or loss of face has been highlighted as an important element of Arab military culture. Studies identify how misunderstanding this honour/shame relationship can distance the trainer from the training audience.³¹ Other studies point to a distinct military tradition throughout the Arab world. Arab armies are proud of their heritage, and are understandably reluctant to adopt Western military practices unreservedly.³² That the British Army expected its soldiers on the ground to understand these social and cultural realities without proper planning and preparation was a major failing.

The UK government’s Libya strategy seemingly lacked the necessary coherence and comprehensiveness required to accommodate complex socio-cultural issues such as those identified above. While British

²⁹ Interview, Reilly.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Berman, L. (2008), ‘Understanding Arab Culture’, *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/47-berman.pdf?q=mag/docs-temp/47-berman.pdf>.

³² DeAtkine (2013), ‘Western Influence on Arab Militaries’, p. 10.

Army trainers wrestled with the practical problems at the implementation level, they had little or no support from a strategy that failed to interact on a wider plain. After the ‘Arab Spring’, analysts were emphasizing the unique position in Libyan politics and society long played by the military, and recommended that efforts to encourage the Libyan army out of politics must also ensure that Libyan society was included in the process.³³ Furthermore, they highlighted that the Libyan military now had an image problem: Libyan society regarded it as a privileged part of the old order, benefiting from access to oil revenues and entirely in the service of the Gaddafi regime.³⁴ In such an absence of trust, the new Libyan army would need assistance in rebuilding its relationship with the society it was meant to serve.

British strategic planners could have referred to Lebanon in the late 1990s for an example of how such relationship-building might have been undertaken effectively. There, a comprehensive security sector reform programme was complemented by a major ‘public relations’ campaign. This effectively remodelled the Lebanese army to project it as the only institution guaranteeing the country’s national existence, effectively undermining the role otherwise assumed by local paramilitary forces.³⁵ In the case of Lebanon, planners understood that the stronger the army’s image was in society, the greater would be its ability to impose authority over disparate militias. This was a lesson directly relevant to post-Gaddafi Libya, where bringing local militias under control was the initial driving force behind creating the General Purpose Force in 2013. However, no such coherent approach was evident in Britain’s Libya assistance programme, which seemed too ad hoc and lacking genuine cross-government commitment. The impact at Bassingbourn was marked. With no foundation in a more comprehensive strategy, the project was isolated and vulnerable.

Security environment

The third lesson from Britain’s Libya project concerns the failure to address the specific needs of the post-Gaddafi security environment. Planners based the Bassingbourn training programme on low-level technical military training. Such a focus did not take account of the crushing impact of years of Gaddafi ‘coup-proofing’ on general military effectiveness. This had been evident during the uprising against Gaddafi in 2011, when, lacking organization and leadership, the Libyan army failed either to protect the regime or to play any role in the revolt itself. That the military simply melted into the background was a direct result of the mistreatment it had suffered during the Gaddafi years.³⁶ Therefore, the new Libyan army’s most urgent need was not necessarily technical military training, but potentially leadership, teamwork and organization. With this in mind, the defence element of the UK government’s Libya strategy failed to focus on those aspects of the security sector in most need of reform.

The precarious state of the Libyan military should not have come as a surprise to the British Army. Armies of autocratic states in the Middle East and elsewhere are notorious for the complex array of measures that their respective regimes have instigated in order to restrict their military effectiveness and thus guard against the potential threat of a coup.³⁷ In the case of Libya, Gaddafi’s

³³ Gaub, F. (2014), *Arab Armies: Agents of Change? Before and After 2011*, Paris: European Union Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 43–44.

³⁴ Gaub, F. (2011), *Libya in Limbo: How to Fill the Security Vacuum*, Rome: NATO Defence College, pp. 3–4.

³⁵ Gaub, F. (2010), *Rebuilding Armed Forces: Learning from Iraq and Lebanon*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, pp. 18–22, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1068.pdf>.

³⁶ Gaub (2014), *Arab Armies* pp. 39–40.

³⁷ Rubin, B. (2002), ‘The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics’ in Rubin, B. and Keaney, T. A. (eds) (2012), *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy*, London: Frank Cass, pp. 1–22.

intense fear of a military coup resulted in the armed forces' emasculation. Gaddafi forbade training with live ammunition, refused the establishment of brigade or divisional levels of command, created overlapping and conflicting reporting chains, and arbitrarily rotated key commanders on a frequent basis.³⁸ Previous mentoring missions in the Arab world have shown how long-term impact has been severely constrained by 'coup-proofing' measures.³⁹ Informed British Army officials could have challenged the focus of the Bassingbourn initiative. They could have recommended a more sophisticated, twin-track approach, designed to build teamwork and morale at the junior level through adventurous training and leadership exercises while developing organizational and command skills at more senior levels through various courses at the Ministry of Defence's Defence Academy.

Such a focus would have been aligned better with the recommendations of analysts who had highlighted areas of the Libyan security sector in most need of reform, and who had pointed to the imperative of curtailing the role of the increasingly dominant independent militias in post-Gaddafi Libya through integration with a reformed Libyan army that itself recognized its need to change.⁴⁰ These analysts had also emphasized the areas most lacking at the time, notably among them leadership, command and control arrangements, and unit cohesion – all critical elements ravaged by Gaddafi's 'coup-proofing'.⁴¹ Instead, however, the UK government maintained the strategy's defence-related focus firmly in what it perceived to be the British Army's 'comfort zone' – the delivery of low-level technical military training. Thus, the Libya strategy as manifested through the Bassingbourn project was misaligned with the needs of the post-Gaddafi security environment.

Cross-government commitment

The fourth lesson from the United Kingdom's Libya programme concerns the failure to identify what clearly emerges from this case study. This section addresses the conclusions of the government's official report into the training at Bassingbourn, and current government views regarding the project's perceived major failing.

The official report commended the level of cross-government commitment to the Bassingbourn project, and stated that the problems experienced in implementation stemmed from the trainees' background and the deteriorating political situation in Libya. As the three lessons above highlight, the report's conclusions fall short of describing the full picture – i.e. the report does not identify that with a more coherent and comprehensive strategy delivered with full government engagement, issues arising from the trainees' background could have been addressed, and, potentially, the deteriorating situation in Libya could have been arrested or at least saved from free fall. Furthermore, while there was a degree of cross-government involvement in the Libya project, the first three lessons show that this lacked coherence with the realities of post-Gaddafi Libya and fell short of the required levels of commitment. All this was evident even though the UK government's own defence engagement strategy – which opens with the assertion from the 2010 National Security Strategy 'we need to draw together, and use, all the instruments of national power, so that the sum of the British effort is much greater than its component parts'⁴² – emphasizes cross-Whitehall integration as an underlying principle.

³⁸ Pollack, K. M. (2002), *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness 1948–1991*, Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 358–424.

³⁹ DeAtkine (2013), 'Western Influence on Arab Militaries', p. 9.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group (2011), *Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges After Gadhafi*, Brussels: International Crisis Group.

⁴¹ Gaub, F. (2013), 'The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-proofing and Repression', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36(2): pp. 221–24.

⁴² UK Government (2013), *International Defence Engagement Strategy*, p. 1.

This section concludes with a comment on perceptions, at the time of writing, of the Bassingbourn project's major failing. According to one well-placed observer, several senior government officials currently involved in defence engagement policy always thought that the project would be extremely challenging, and now firmly believe that the training of foreign recruits in the United Kingdom should be avoided in future.⁴³ While this view is understandable, it misses the essential point. As highlighted above, if the national strategy is coherent and all-encompassing, and, crucially, if the trainers are properly prepared and culturally attuned, and have the assistance of regional partners, then where the training takes place is not necessarily the determining factor in the success of the project. On occasion, the United Kingdom may well be the best option as a training location, chiefly in cases where there are in-country security concerns and/or difficulties in accessing modern training resources. Indeed, the input of specialist training teams appropriately equipped *vis-à-vis* their training audience could more than mitigate any apparent shortcomings in location. Bassingbourn did not fail because it was Bassingbourn. It failed because the wider strategy was anaemic, not least in the context of a highly volatile security situation in Libya, and the British Army was not set for success.

Recommendations

The four lessons from the Libya/Bassingbourn case study, as set out above, highlight some of the difficulties experienced thus far in the practical application of the British government's International Defence Engagement Strategy. The prevailing themes have been that the strategic plan for Libya lacked coherence and commitment, and that the British Army lacked readiness for its role. Building on these lessons, this section offers four recommendations that should be considered in designing future defence engagement projects. Each recommendation is intended to help make government strategies more relevant and the British Army better prepared.

Future defence engagement strategies should encompass coordinated efforts across the full spectrum of political, social and security arenas, rather than depending solely on the military dimension.

First, future defence engagement strategies should encompass coordinated efforts across the full spectrum of political, social and security arenas, rather than depending solely on the military dimension. Although the Libya programme eventually included activity across the SJD domains, these wider aspects emerged well after the high-profile announcement of the Bassingbourn training initiative at the Lough Erne G8 summit in June 2013. It is evident, however, that the security sector cannot successfully be reformed in isolation: a coordinated strategy must include political, military and societal actors. Officials tasked with operationalizing this strategy must deploy and operate alongside one another simultaneously; any delay in devising a strategy or deploying staff risks failure to capitalize on early signs of local goodwill. Furthermore, a coherent and all-encompassing capacity-building effort should be supported by a comprehensive 'public relations' campaign to help shape local opinion and forge consent. Bassingbourn failed partly because it was an isolated project with little or no support from wider areas requiring similar engagement. Disconnected and exposed, it was vulnerable to the unstable socio-political and security situation in post-Gaddafi Libya.

⁴³ Author's interview with a member of the secretariat for the cross-government Strategic Regional Implementation Group for Defence Engagement (STRIDE), London, 28 July 2015.

Second, capacity-building at all levels of the non-military sector is of critical importance. Weak or ineffective organs of government can very rapidly undermine external stabilization efforts. Security sector reform can only occur once political actors have established the foundations of good governance and are in a position to devise and execute reforming policies. Similarly, civil society must be included in the transition process. The local population must understand and support the new national security force in order to ensure its supremacy over local militias and other destabilizing actors. The lack of proper political oversight on the part of the Libyan authorities and the absence of support from the Libyan people undermined the Bassingbourn initiative from the outset. The Bassingbourn trainees simply lost interest in the project as they came to understand that their government and society had lost interest in them.

Third, the British Army must invest more time in understanding its training audience and the associated cultural and social norms. As a result of the many other commitments that take up valuable resources and focus, its current approach to defence engagement looks part-time and amateurish. Although the British Army claims a long tradition of working well with Middle Eastern armies, there seems little sign that past experience has been retained, examined and drawn on. Specific understanding is critical when dealing with armies from a distinct culture in which matters of politics, prestige and history may stand at odds with any attempt to create a new army on the Western model. The deployment of Short Term Training Teams, for example, and other quick technical solutions favoured by the Ministry of Defence have an ephemeral effect at best. A more persistent presence overseas, with measured approaches and longer-term goals, could be more effective. Critical to such an approach will be the increased use of regional partnerships to facilitate the achievement of goals and bridge cultural gaps. The late inclusion of Jordanian army instructors at Bassingbourn is a case in point. In the earlier stages of the training programme, a lack of preparation provided by British Army planners meant that the Bassingbourn trainers failed to connect with their training audience in a convincing manner for a number of cultural reasons. Ultimately, this disconnect made it easier for the recruits to rebel.

Future defence engagement strategies must focus on those areas most needed by the country concerned, and not on those the UK Ministry of Defence is most comfortable delivering.

The British Army may therefore need to address its organization and structures in order to better align itself for future defence engagement work. The decision to have several brigades focus on cooperation with particular parts of the world is a step in the right direction,⁴⁴ but these are already swamped by other tasks. For example, while responsible for delivering the Bassingbourn project, 4th Mechanized Brigade was also amalgamating with 15 (North East) Brigade, converting to its Army 2020 organization, generating and maintaining a standing UK operations capability, and fostering the growth of army reservists in the northeast.

⁴⁴ These brigades are part of the 1st (United Kingdom) Division, which for defence engagement purposes comprises 4 Infantry Brigade (regionally aligned with North Africa), 7 Infantry Brigade (West Africa), 8 Engineer Brigade (South Asia), 11 Infantry Brigade (Southeast Asia), 38 Irish Brigade (Southern Africa), 42 Infantry Brigade (East Africa), 51 Infantry Brigade (the Gulf), and 160 Infantry Brigade (Eastern Europe and Central Asia).

Similarly, the recent establishment of the British Army's new Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research (CHACR) is also positive, but staffing it has been slow and its output hitherto has been minimal. For future defence engagement initiatives, CHACR should inform the planning phase by facilitating background research from organizations both within the Army and without, with the aim of making the project better focused and cognizant of relevant lessons from history. As highlighted by 3 SCOTS at Bassingbourn, front-line units are not in a position to invest the necessary time and resources to acquire proper linguistic skills and cultural orientation. If defence engagement is to represent a third of the British Army's output under the Army 2020 concept, then potentially a third of total capacity should be restructured to focus solely on this endeavour. Specific defence engagement teams could be formed, with time and resources to focus on relevant areas and develop the cultural understanding and linguistic skills required for success. With a regular strength of less than 82,000, the British Army understandably makes much of the flexibility of its force, insisting that the 'same soldier' can protect the nation, fight the country's enemies, deal with disaster at home and prevent conflict through defence engagement activities such as the Libyan project at Bassingbourn.⁴⁵ Yet here lies a paradox: the reality of declining troop numbers that compels soldiers to have such a wide range of capabilities also means they are extremely hard-pressed, constantly shuttling from one crisis or commitment to another, with very little time for the sort of activities – such as language and cultural awareness training – that enable success in these disparate missions.

Fourth, future defence engagement strategies must focus on those areas most needed by the country concerned, and not on those the UK Ministry of Defence is most comfortable delivering. Bassingbourn focused on low-level technical military training, when the urgent need lay in leadership, command and control, and unit cohesion. The focus must also be constantly reviewed, as situations are always evolving. The Bassingbourn concept was devised in the first half of 2013 but not delivered until mid-2014, by which time the political situation in Libya had changed irrevocably and the very basis for the programme was no longer tenable. Despite the assertion in the government's defence engagement strategy that 'We will rigorously re-evaluate all activities, rebalance our effort accordingly, and identify and invest in our most effective Defence Engagement tools recognising the value they provide across UK interests',⁴⁶ this principle was not applied in the case of Bassingbourn. Furthermore, security sector reform is hugely challenging in the absence of a legitimate state monopoly on violence, as was the case in Libya, and Bassingbourn was largely derailed because of this very absence. If a situation deteriorates during execution of a programme, or if initial parameters are no longer valid, then the programme must accommodate the changing reality or be terminated before events dictate.

⁴⁵ Carter, 'The Future of the British Army'.

⁴⁶ UK Government 2013, *International Defence Engagement Strategy*, p. 4.

Conclusion

There is a temptation to interpret the chaos in Libya today as another example of an ill-conceived Western intervention.⁴⁷ Indeed, with the political process yet to be resolved and the security sector still uncontrolled, the country's future after Gaddafi remains far from certain. However, this view fails to take account of the broader canvas. That the Bassingbourn programme to train a new Libyan army produced unfavourable results does not mean the defence engagement concept is inherently flawed. The United Kingdom's defence engagement programme with Libya was a genuine attempt to provide stabilization in the post-Afghanistan/Iraq era, in which assistance efforts need to be more discrete, fully cognizant of local context, and completed without the protection of troops on the ground. This is a tall order, requiring sophisticated planning and focused application. As set out in this paper, the Libya project lacked these crucial elements. Until these shortcomings are made good, it will be difficult to assess the efficacy of the wider International Defence Engagement Strategy. What is clear, however, is that successful defence engagement is both complex and challenging. Just because it may be less costly, in terms of 'blood and treasure', than ground force interventions, this does not make defence engagement an easy option. If the United Kingdom genuinely wants to avoid what Antonio Giustozzi points to as the 'folly of our age',⁴⁸ and understand the world before trying to change it, then future defence engagement projects must take heed of the lessons from the Libya/Bassingbourn experience. The theory could be sound enough, but the practice requires some refinement.

⁴⁷ Chollet, D. and Fishman, B. (2015), 'Who Lost Libya?', *Foreign Affairs*, (94)3: pp. 154–59.

⁴⁸ 'Every age has its follies: perhaps the folly of our age could be identified as an unmatched ambition to change the world, without bothering to study it in detail and understand it first'. Giustozzi, A. (2009), *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 1. This text is much quoted by the British Army in the post-Afghanistan/Iraq era. See, for example, Carter, 'The Future of the British Army'.

About the author

Lieutenant Colonel James Chandler was commissioned into the British Army in 1997, having studied at the University of Liverpool and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He has served on operational duty in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq – in the latter as Military Assistant to the UK's Commanding General – and has also been seconded to the British embassy in Amman. As a staff officer, he has worked at the MoD's Permanent Joint Headquarters, and most recently as an instructor at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. During his service he has also completed attachments in academia: in 2009 he completed an MPhil in international relations at the University of Cambridge; and in 2015 he was the inaugural Army Visiting Fellow at Chatham House. He is currently attending the Advanced Command and Staff Course at the MoD's Defence Academy.

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Cover image: Libyan soldiers take part in a parade marking the 75th anniversary of the army's establishment at Martyrs' Square in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, on 13 August 2015.

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