

**Anglo Libyan relations and the British military facilities**

**1964-1970**

Sean W Straw BA MA

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2010

## **Abstract**

This study explores the role of the Anglo-Libyan relationship and the British military facilities in the Labour Government's foreign and defence policy from 1964 to 1970. This relationship, built upon a "shared tradition" of strategic self interest, was given form in the 1953 treaty which permitted British deployments. The military presence enabled the British to maintain their wider strategic interests East of Suez as well as provide security for the Idris regime in Tripoli. As the Labour Government made cuts in Britain's defence policy, Libya lost its strategic value but grew in importance for the trade opportunities it offered. In line with defence cuts and a Libyan withdrawal request in 1967, the facilities were scaled back. The remaining presence enabled the British to exploit the growing Libyan economy and maintain influence and defence interests in the country. Tripoli grew increasingly unnerved by the political and territorial ambitions of its Arab Nationalist neighbours, Egypt and Algeria, whilst London regarded Libya as vulnerable to economic and political penetration from the Soviet Union, placing the relationship within the context of the Cold War and Western security. As a consequence the Labour Government encouraged the Libyans to take greater responsibility for their defence, exporting arms to Tripoli and welcoming attempts by Prime Minister Al-Bakkoush to develop the country using oil revenue. After the 1969 Libyan revolution the Labour Government, concerned by the strategic implications of an Arab Nationalist regime in Tripoli, sought to secure Britain's position and steer the regime away from participating in the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, Tripoli was no longer politically inclined towards the West and London's attempt to forge a relationship, using existing arms contracts, was complicated by the contentious issue of the sale of Chieftain tanks negotiated with the previous regime. Negotiations floundered and British interests, including a residual presence were lost. Not until thirty years later did the relationship regain any of its former geniality as a strategic "shared tradition" re-emerged to bring the two nations together once more.

## **Attestation**

I understand the nature of plagiarism, and I am aware of the University's policy on this

I certify that this Thesis reports original work by me during my University project

**Signature**

**Date**

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following: Dr Spencer Mawby, for his guidance and support as well as meticulous reviewing of my work which has enabled me to complete this thesis. Dr Wynn Rees of the Politics Department, University of Nottingham for providing me with the opportunity to undertake this study in the first place. Finally thanks to Dr T Allen of the University of London for providing encouragement, support and technical back up.

I would like to thank Amal (Molly) Tarhuni, fellow doctoral student LSE, for providing me with encouragement by providing links to other researchers, academics and students involved in the study of Libya. I would also like to mention Brian Wildeman, ex RAF, for furnishing myself with an interest in the Libyan deployments.

Personal thanks go to those individuals who have always shown an interest in my studies and thereby have encouraged me to persevere. Special mention goes to Andy B, for being Andy B and believing in me more than I do myself at times, colleagues at Coventry Local Authority (Education) who regularly asked about my progress, including Janice Taggart. I must also mention Michael Scott for being an inspiration in enthusiasm and focus.

# Contents

Abbreviations .....	vi
List of Figures.....	viii
Map 1 Libya 1967.....	ix
Map 2 East of Suez .....	x
1 Introduction .....	1
1.1 Analysis .....	5
1.2 Methodology .....	8
1.3 Historiography.....	10
1.4 Britain and Libya 1945 to 1964.....	27
2 The Anglo-Libyan Review 1964-1965 .....	47
2.1 Libyan Defence and Political Relations.....	50
2.2 Economic Interests.....	61
2.3 Strategic Concerns.....	67
2.4 Conclusion.....	72
3 East of Suez and Libya 1965-1966 .....	74
3.1 Strategic Contraction.....	77
3.2 Libyan Defence and the United States.....	84
3.3 The Facilities and Political Relations .....	99
3.4 Conclusion.....	114
4 The Six Day War 1967.....	116
4.1 The War and Anglo-Libyan Relations .....	120
4.2 Anglo-Libyan Economic Relations .....	138
4.3 Britain's Strategic Policy.....	148
4.4 Conclusion.....	166
5 Twilight of Relations 1968 -1969.....	169
5.1 Rebuilding the Relationship.....	173
5.2 Defence Planning.....	184
5.3 Libya's Commercial Environment .....	190

5.4	The End of East of Suez .....	200
5.5	Expanding Military Involvement.....	212
5.6	Conclusion.....	217
6	The Revolution 1969-1970.....	219
6.1	New Political Relations.....	226
6.2	Strategic Implications .....	231
6.3	Securing Economic Interests.....	234
6.4	The Chieftain tank.....	239
6.5	Reviewing the Relationship .....	252
6.6	Labour Leaves Office .....	276
6.7	Conclusion.....	284
7	General Conclusion.....	289
	Bibliography .....	302
	Primary Sources.....	302
	National Archives.....	302
	Official Publications .....	305
	Memoirs and Dairies.....	306
	Secondary Sources .....	307
	Books .....	307
	Articles .....	311
	Electronic Sources.....	313

## Abbreviations

BP	British Petroleum
BT	Board of Trade
CAB	Cabinet Papers
C/CC	Cabinet Conclusions
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation
Cmnd	Command Papers
CP	Cabinet Memoranda
D	Defence Committee
DEFE	Ministry of Defence
DOPC	Cabinet Defence and Oversea Policy Committee
DOPC (O)	Defence and Oversea Policy Committee (Official)
DP	Defence Policy Staff
DRWP	Defence Review Working Party
FO	Foreign Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FP	Future Policy
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
HQBFNE	Head-quarters British Forces Near East
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
LIC	Local Intelligence Committee, Libya
MOD	Ministry of Defence
Mtg	meetings
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institutes
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NEAD	North and East Africa Department (FO)
OPD	Defence and Overseas Policy Committee Papers
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
PWP	Planning Working Party, Foreign Office
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SOVMEDRON	Soviet Mediterranean Squadron
T	Treasury
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
WEU	Western European Union
WO	War Office

## List of Figures

Figure 1	UK and US military facilities, summer 1967 .....	ix
Figure 2	Principal UK military deployments and alliance member states East of Suez, 1967.....	x

## Map 1 Libya 1967



Figure 1 UK and US military facilities, summer 1967. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from R Worrall, 'The strategic limitations of a Middle East client state by the mid-1950s: Britain, Libya and the Suez Crisis', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30 (2007), 311.

## Map 2 East of Suez

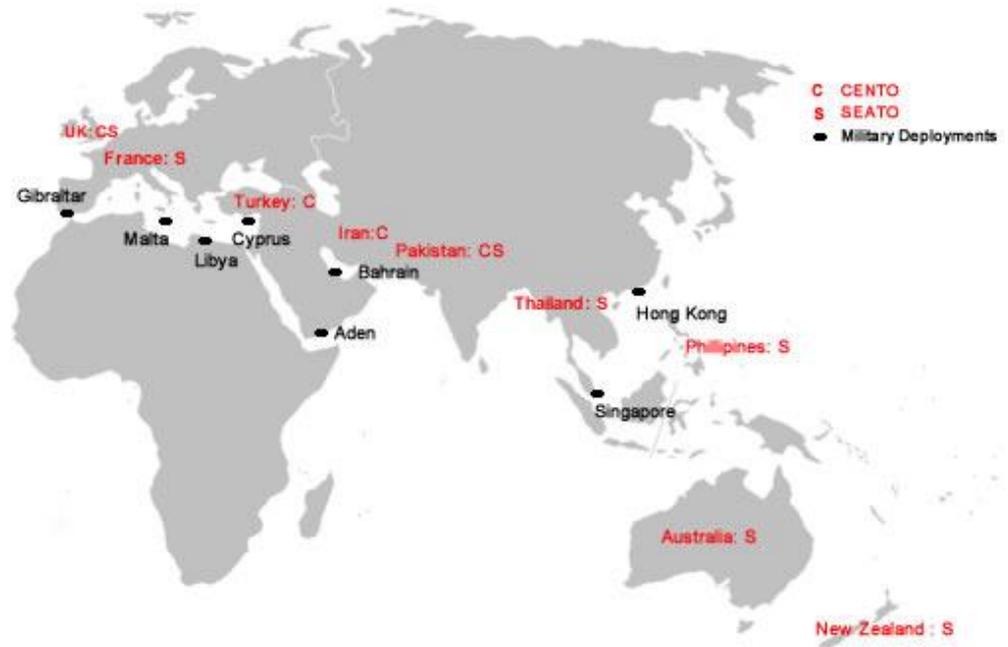


Figure 2 Principal UK military deployments and alliance member states East of Suez, 1967

# 1 Introduction

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) web site proclaims that there is a “shared tradition” between Britain and Libya. There is little explanation of the nature of this “shared tradition”, but it involves a close relationship between the two countries which, since the release of the convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset Ali Al-Megrahi in August 2009, has come under growing scrutiny. According to the website the relationship was forged between the British and the Senussi Arabs during World War Two against the Italian colonialist regime and contributed to the creation of the modern Libyan state on 24 December 1951.<sup>1</sup> The partnership was reaffirmed through the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance signed in 1953 and remained anchored to this agreement until January 1972 when Tripoli terminated the treaty. The website has nothing to narrate regarding the next thirty years and evidently there is no “shared tradition” during this later period.

From 1969 Anglo-Libyan relations were deeply troubled. Colonel Gaddafi’s regime, which had overthrown King Idris in September 1969, stood strategically opposed to the West. Gaddafi attempted to “internationalise” the Libyan revolution. Resources, including money, hardware and training camps were provided for terrorist organisations around the world including the Provisional Irish Republican Army, waging a conflict with the British presence in Northern Ireland. Gaddafi also supported Palestinian resistance groups. The Colonel became the head of a campaign aimed at undermining colonialism and opposing oppression. Relations with London worsened in April 1984 when Police Officer Yvonne Fletcher was shot dead by bullets fired from the Libyan People’s Bureau. Several prominent Libyan ex-patriots were murdered in

---

<sup>1</sup> UK in Libya, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2010. Our Shared Tradition. London. Available from <http://ukinlibya.fco.gov.uk/en/working-with-libya/shared-tradition> [22 January 2010].

London in the 1980s whilst Libya was linked to a bomb explosion at La Belle discotheque in Berlin on 5 April 1986. This episode was used as justification for a US air attack on Libya on 15 April 1986. UN Security Council mandated sanctions were raised against Libya in 1992 over the bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, for which the British and United States held Tripoli responsible.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, considered a terrorist-sponsoring pariah state by the West, Libya spent 34 years in a diplomatic, military, economic and political standoff with Britain and the USA. Diplomatic relations between Britain and Libya were not reinstated until 1999. In 2003, faced with a stagnating economy and political opposition from Islamic fundamentalism, Gaddafi reached out to the West to secure his regime. Tripoli renounced terrorism and gave up its weapons of mass destruction programme in chemical and nuclear technology. This move was welcomed by the West because it offered an element of strategic security in North Africa and the Arab world, politically, economically and geographically. The poverty of the region had made the population vulnerable to Islamic fundamentalism, whilst Libya and Algeria's oil and gas reserves offered a less vulnerable energy source than supplies from the Soviet Union or the Middle East. Libya also served as a transit point for illegal immigration from Africa into Europe and it was to Europe's benefit that security in this area was tightened.

In early 2004 British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited Tripoli and a general rapprochement with the West has since developed which has seen the Anglo-Libyan relationship blossom, especially in trade agreements. The Libyan oil market has opened up to foreign oil and gas companies and in May 2007 BP struck a £453 million exploration and production deal with the Libyan Investment Corporation and Libya's National Oil Company.<sup>3</sup> Strategic security for the West is being sought through the

---

<sup>2</sup> G. Simons, *Libya and the West, From Independence to Lockerbie* (Oxford, 2003), pp.123-128.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, 2007. "BP Returns to Libya in \$900 Million deal". London. Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6700255.stm> [2 March 2010].

expansion of Europe's security borders into the Sahara desert, to prevent illegal immigration. Gaddafi's regime has played a significant role in this task. Furthermore, the development of a more amenable regime in Libya dampens the threat from Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa to European security. The economic development of the country has helped to undermine Libya's internal political opposition and enabled the regime to secure its own domestic security, as well as promote Libyan strategic interests in Africa. Harbours long held pretensions to political as well as "monarchical" leadership of the continent, Gaddafi awarded himself the title of "King of Kings of Africa" in August 2008 and in February 2009 Gaddafi acquired the chairmanship of the African Union.<sup>4</sup>

Knowledge of the Anglo-Libyan political relationship in the 1960s establishes that the developments of today are a manifestation of the older "shared tradition". This "tradition" was based upon strategic concerns, whilst economic interests grew in importance. Close relations during this period were not based so much on any cultural or historical ties, implied by the word "tradition", but rather a mutual strategic self-interest. During the 1960s the "tradition" witnessed a mutually beneficial, Anglo Libyan political relationship that incorporated British military facilities in Libya, in return for a British defence guarantee and sizeable subsidy paid annually to the regime of King Idris, which the regime was not obliged to spend in any specific way. The defence guarantee provided Idris with strategic security, sandwiched as the country was between Arab Nationalist regimes in Algeria and Egypt. Most significantly, the facilities played a role in Britain's larger defence strategy East of Suez. They enabled London to service commitments and project British interests into the Middle East and South East Asia and undertake relatively cheap training exercises in the Libyan desert. With the discovery of oil in Libya in 1959 and rapid growth in the country's economy, the deployments were involved in promoting British trade, particularly in

---

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, 2008. Gaddafi: Africa's "King of Kings". London. Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7588033.stm> [29 August 2008].

arms and continued to secure the political relationship by reassuring Idris of London's commitment to Libyan defence.

This study is focused upon the Anglo-Libyan relationship and the British military facilities in Libya, during a period when British defence and foreign policy strategy witnessed a withdrawal from East of Suez. For the benefit of this study the Libyan facilities are considered to be all those military deployments granted under the terms of the 1953 treaty. In 1964 these consisted of RAF El Adem and forces stationed at the garrisons of Tripoli and Benghazi in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica which provided for the defence of Libya. Furthermore there were naval and military missions, which were tasked with military liaison duties and organizing training exercises with the Libyan Government. The presence at El Adem also facilitated the additional treaty sanctioned functions of staging and over-flying rights for British aircraft along an air corridor through Libya, Sudan, Aden and on to deployments East of Suez. References to "bases" refer specifically to those "garrisoned" facilities such as Tripoli and Benghazi. The British did not consider facilities at Tobruk and El Adem a base, but rather a staging post and generally as one facility, with a landing strip.

This study is important primarily because very little has been written about the Anglo-Libyan relationship during the 1960s. It adds to our knowledge of British foreign and defence policy during the 1960s and the realignment of British defence strategy from its global orientation to a policy centred upon Europe and NATO. Finally, it offers insights into the foreign policy of the Labour Government. It will supplement as well as provide new evidence relating to the priorities of the Wilson Government and in particular their perceptions of Britain's role in the world and what constituted London's policy concerns as the country withdrew from its global role.

## 1.1 Analysis

British foreign and defence policy during the 1960s aimed at strategic security for Britain and the West. Britain's East of Suez defence strategy, which the Libyan facilities serviced, diminished as a result of a strategic realignment but London had growing economic and commercial concerns in the country and exploited the close relationship between Tripoli and London to maintain and develop these. This study focuses around two core areas of analysis:

Firstly, the nature and development of the Anglo-Libyan relationship from 1964 to 1970 and the importance of the British military presence. Analysis will consider how the relationship was affected by the Anglo-Libyan Review of 1965, the Defence Review of 1966, the consequences of the Six Day War, the withdrawal request of 1967 and the review of the remaining facilities and the treaty in 1968. Concurrently it will consider the importance of the growth of the Libyan economy and the increasing political independence of the country as well as the part the facilities played in these developments. Finally it will consider the revolution of September 1969 and the emergence of an Arab Nationalist regime which London attempted to forge a new relationship with.

The second area is wider British foreign and defence policy, which had implications for British facilities in Libya. The deployments lost their significance as policy shifted from a strategy based East of Suez, to a politically Eurocentric and Atlantic defence policy from 1965 to 1968. Additionally, the consequences of the Six Day War for the capability and effectiveness of military facilities as tools of foreign policy, as well as Britain's effectiveness in contributing militarily, politically or diplomatically to the crisis in the Middle East will be considered. The revolution of 1969 tilted the strategic environment of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa further towards Arab

Nationalism and Soviet influence and this event had consequences for British interests and the future of the remaining facilities.

The Labour Government's contribution is examined within each of the above fields. Despite a commitment to Britain's world role, Labour had come to power offering increased welfare spending and this, along with economic problems and a gradual acceptance that the role was no longer tenable, was to lead to cuts in defence spending and eventually a withdrawal from an East of Suez defence strategy. This had repercussions for the continued maintenance of the Libyan facilities. Whilst Labour ministers sought to disengage from the Anglo-Libyan commitment, the increasing British economic stake in Libya was considered to be too important to risk losing if the commitment was completely abandoned. After the revolution British ministers were keen to secure a relationship with Libya and some of the remaining facilities, because commercial benefits were gained through them. This enterprise proved unsuccessful, as did the attempt to secure the strategic environment in the eastern Mediterranean by forging a relationship with an Arab Nationalist regime in Tripoli.

Within these areas there are a number of recurring policy considerations, or themes, which thread through the historical narrative and contribute towards the development of British policy on Libya. Firstly, British policy had to take account of the defence guarantee granted to Libya through the treaty of 1953 which obliged London to come to the defence of Tripoli if the North African state was attacked. London had to plan for this obligation and this required a minimum military presence in the country. Defence of the country also had the potential to engage the British in a conflict with Egypt and this could have had enormous strategic repercussions, with the very real chance of super power involvement.

The second theme involves consideration of the part other nations played in British policy calculations. London's strategic deliberations were also those of the West and

had to take into account the role of the United States, Algeria, Egypt and the Soviet Union. Policy was increasingly concerned with the political, economic and defence implications of Soviet penetration of the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean along with the political and military threat posed by Nasser's Egypt to British interests in the Arab world. British policy also had to consider and react to the diplomatic pressure brought to bear by Washington regarding Britain's policy of strategic withdrawal. Washington had looked to London to provide support for US global defence policy during the 1960s and withdrawal from Libya raised concerns in the US that the West's position in North Africa and the Middle East would be undermined and lead to a political vacuum. This concern also troubled London as withdrawal progressed.

The final theme is the growing importance of trade in oil and arms with Libya and the benefits this brought to the British economy. The Anglo-Libyan relationship and facilities grew in significance as a result of oil development and exploitation, which led to opportunities for London to exploit the booming Libyan economy. Of special significance, the facilities allowed the British to promote arms sales. The securing of oil supplies was also of importance to London in the 1960s, especially after the Six Day War when an embargo of supplies by Arab producers to Western nations underlined the significance of a continued safe, energy supply. Disruption of oil supplies had the potential to undermine the fragile British economy.

## 1.2 Methodology

The thesis is structured in chronological order, the first three sections consider the period 1964 to 1967 as the Labour Government sought to withdraw from some of the facilities. The next section considers the period between the Six Day War and the revolution as the Anglo-Libyan relationship developed and Britain maintained a limited presence. Finally the focus is on the events following the revolution as the British Government sought a relationship with the new Libyan regime. Within each section the main fields and policy themes outlined above are addressed.

Turning to the use of primary material to inform the research, it was necessary to use official government documents available at the British National Archives. There is little secondary material on the Anglo-Libyan relationship during the 1960s and so the documents enabled a picture to be drawn of the main events as well as provide material for the key areas of analysis. Many documents are related to the day to day administration of the facilities, developing trade in arms and oil, British military training and brief security reports on nationalist and Egyptian subversion prior to the revolution. Documents are plentiful upon significant events such as the Libyan Review of 1965, the 1967 withdrawal demand, the revolution and the withdrawal of British troops from Libya in 1970. The contentious sale of arms and Chieftain tanks to Libya in 1969 and 1970 is covered in detail in the records. These significant events are documented at Defence and Oversea Policy Committee (DOPC) and Cabinet level as well as at official level. Primary material from the National Archives has also been used on broader Cabinet defence and foreign policy making at DOPC and Cabinet level. There are auto-biographies and diaries that also cover the period of the Labour Government from 1964 to 1970 and these inform the study.

Other primary materials used were American documents available in the "Foreign Relations of the United States" series and these have enabled an alternative perspective upon the strategic concerns at the time. Only recently have Libyan archives in Tripoli, from the period in question, become available, although these as yet have not been translated and are poorly organised. As a result it is not entirely possible to have a picture of the relationship from both sides.

Secondary material in the form of books and articles have been utilised on the Labour Government's defence and foreign policy. These publications have helped to inform the research, particularly on foreign and defence policy priorities at the time, both at official level and in the Labour Cabinet. Secondary material on US and Soviet foreign and defence policy adds to an appreciation of the nature of the strategic environment during the 1960s whilst texts on Nasser and Egypt have enabled the research to draw conclusions about the threat to British interests in Libya and the Middle East. The Six Day War and its repercussions for British interests, the economic background to British Government policy at this time, Britain's economic stake in the Middle East, including arms sales, have all been considered using a variety of secondary sources.

### 1.3 Historiography

The historiography of Anglo-Libyan relations in the 1960s is limited. Research has been centred upon the 1950s and where there is a discussion on the 1960s it forms just a small part of a larger study of Libyan post-war history. The Wilson Government's approach to the relationship is only addressed on the margins of literature on the Government. In contrast wider British foreign and defence policy of the period has been the subject of detailed research focusing on the broad issues of defence reviews, East of Suez, and specific issues like UDI in Rhodesia and the Anglo-American relationship. This has been supplemented by literature on the Labour Government during the 1960s, building upon a large collection of diaries, biographies and auto-biographies and archival material that has become available since the late 1960s; for example, the diaries of Cabinet ministers Richard Crossman and Barbara Castle. This has helped to inform discussion of the dynamics of the Government and its approach to foreign and defence issues.

The historiography of themes considered in this thesis is also limited. Anglo-American diplomatic relations have been examined in relation to the position of sterling and Washington's global foreign policy priorities in the 1960s in texts and articles. Britain's diplomatic relationship with the Middle East has also been examined in the context of the relationship with Nasser and the Six Day War in several texts, whilst Brenchley's work on Britain's trade with the Middle East is a worthy and considerable document on Britain's economic interests.<sup>5</sup> However, there is little written on Britain's defence concerns in the Mediterranean and the growing perception of

---

<sup>5</sup> F. Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-1987* (London, 1989).

Soviet threats in the late 1960s, although Hughes' work on the Labour Government and the Cold War has informed our understanding.<sup>6</sup>

To turn back to the fields of study, the issue of Anglo-Libyan relations has been addressed in a number of journal articles with a strong strategic focus and orientated towards the 1950's. Stephen Blackwell's 'Saving the King: Anglo-American strategy and British counter-subversion operations in Libya, 1953-1959' stresses the strategic value of the country to British and American interests in the 1950s. Libya was of importance in the Middle East and as a defence against Nasser, as well as providing logistical support for the Northern Tier states' defence against the Soviet Union. Blackwell stresses that the Libyan facilities were operationally redundant because the treaty allowed the Libyans to deny the use of them if this conflicted with Libya's other diplomatic responsibilities, namely to the Covenant of the League of Arab States. Therefore they could not be used against Nasser. By the late 1950s the British sought to reduce the expense of maintaining troops, whose only activity seemed to be to "perform counter-insurgency duties" which consisted of training the Libyan defence forces and maintaining a visible presence to deter opposition to the King. Blackwell considers the King's "legitimacy was exhausted and dependent on external powers". The British had acknowledged, even by the late 1950s, the bankruptcy of using troops to prop up Idris, as military intervention only served to distance regimes further from their populations.<sup>7</sup>

Richard Worrall's 'The strategic limitations of a Middle East client state' also stresses the redundancy of British facilities. Suez "starkly revealed the limitations of Britain's military presence in Libya where the facilities had been unpopular even

---

<sup>6</sup> G. Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics 1964-1970* (Ipswich/New York, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> S. Blackwell, 'Saving the King: Anglo-American strategy and British counter-subversion operations in Libya, 1953-1959', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39 (2003), 1-19, 15.

before the treaty was signed” because the Libyans forbade the British from using the facilities in an attack on Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Alison Pargeter’s ‘Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez Crisis’ similarly focuses upon the 1950s and Libya’s geo-strategic importance to the British. Pargeter notes the outdated nature of the British bases but the political and strategic motives for maintaining facilities are emphasized. Withdrawal was an option but political reasons won the day, as it was concluded the regime would probably turn towards Egypt or the Soviet Union if British support was seen to be withdrawn. A plan to withdraw some troops from Libya was reversed when the Iraqi revolution of 1958 led to the toppling of a British installed monarchy in Baghdad. Pargeter gives a short overview of the Labour Government’s approach to Libya. She indicates that the desire to intervene to maintain the regime had weakened by the early 1960s and suggests the Labour Government’s policy of “progressive withdrawal” meant that intervention was no longer a viable option, especially as by the late 1960s “Britain came to be viewed by many in Libya as an imperialist power that was antithetical to the progression of Arab Nationalism and whose influence had to be removed”.<sup>9</sup>

A picture of Anglo-Libyan relations in the 1960s can be drawn from several works on the political and social- economic development of Libya, although little investigation is made in any of the works specifically on the Anglo-Libyan relationship. Consequently there is very little mention of the Wilson Government’s approach to Libya. The picture drawn is of a British subsidized, poor, undeveloped client state in the 1950s that became a corrupt, unstable country that had grown rich on oil revenues in the 1960s. Simons’ *Libya: The Struggle for Survival* outlines developments in the 1950s and 1960s and points out that Libya was the poorest nation state in the world, exporting mainly esparto grass and scrap metal from arms left behind from the

---

<sup>8</sup> R. Worrall, ‘The strategic limitations of a Middle East client state by the mid-1950s: Britain, Libya and the Suez Crisis’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30 (2007), 309-347.

<sup>9</sup> A. Pargeter, ‘Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis’, *Journal of North African Studies*, 5 (2000), 58.

Second World War. In the 1960s Libya achieved remarkable wealth from the discovery and production of oil. Simons' work narrates developments in the oil industry from the first discoveries to the oil bonanza of the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Vandewalle's study *Libya since Independence* concludes that by the end of the 1960s the country had become a corrupt state, lacking identity and integrity, politically backwards and burdened by bureaucratic chaos. Libya was governed by families and tribal elites with little interest in the future development of the country.<sup>11</sup> Vandewalle's more comprehensive later study, *A History of Modern Libya* has several chapters of relevance to the study. Idris is portrayed as woefully unable to commit himself to effective leadership of the country, whilst his regime is characterized by "intrigue, by personal, family, and royal Diwan politics, and by a growing inability to control the extensive corruption that existed". The King "increasingly retreated from active involvement in the country's life". The "close affiliation" with the West, politically suspect at a time when "anti-Westernism provided a convenient theme for a wide range of grievances in the Arab world", just compounded Idris' political difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

Wright's work, *Libya, a Modern History*, includes a chapter on the Kingdom and concurs that a "more narrowly paternalistic than oppressive" regime existed in the 1960s, although corruption was endemic. The regime was never truly neutralist and was "for many years too closely associated militarily and economically with the main Western powers". The King's failure to criticise the British and the West did not help. Wright examines the disturbances of 1964 when Libyan opposition groups, enthused by Nasser's rhetoric, demanded the withdrawal of British troops. Wright considers this was a "clear warning that all was not well in the kingdom". The 1964 disturbances in Benghazi led to street demonstrations by students declaring their support for Nasser.

---

<sup>10</sup> G. Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke/New York, 1993), p.182.

<sup>11</sup> D. Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence* (New York, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006), p.71.

Protestors were killed and Nasser made a point that after three years of oil revenues Libya was still harbouring Western bases. The 1967 war witnessed a “scale of violence....wholly unexpected” in Libya and these protests were followed by trials of conspirators and opposition members. However, by 1969 there appeared a “calm” in Libya which “in reality hid various preparations for a seizure of power” anticipating the death or abdication of the King. Wright makes reference to the 1960s Anglo-Libyan relationship and mentions the British facilities briefly. He states that “the Libyans themselves were becoming increasingly aware that the presence of foreign facilities belied any pretence to a truly independent foreign policy”. Wright considers that by 1969 Libya was “conspicuous among Arab states in still “living on its geography” by leasing military facilities when there was no longer even the excuse of economic necessity for doing so. This over-reliance on the facilities was indicative of the “moral collapse of the old regime”.<sup>13</sup>

E.A.V de Candole, a former British administrator in post-war Libya, in his work *The Life and Times of King Idris* produces a very sympathetic portrayal of the King, and whilst his material is probably too compassionate towards the King it is useful mainly as a general biography of King Idris' life. The impression one draws from de Candole's work is that the King was ascetic, retiring and committed to his country. His offers to resign during times of crisis were not bluffs but made through a genuine desire to do what was best for the country. De Candole underplays the British presence and stresses that the British military deployments in Tripoli and Benghazi were never more than a brigade group in size and there was never a major British base in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Turning to the wider strategic issues behind British foreign and defence policy we find that little attention is paid to Libya. Young in *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, International Policy* identifies the Libyan staging posts as facilities important to the

---

<sup>13</sup> J. Wright, *Libya a Modern History* (London, 1981), pp. 96, 99-114,140,121.

<sup>14</sup> E.V.A. De Candole, *The Life and Times of King Idris of Libya* (Manchester, 1990).

East of Suez role.<sup>15</sup> Libya is only mentioned by Saki Dockrill in terms of its relevance to defence cuts in 1965, which formed part of the progressive withdrawal from East of Suez.<sup>16</sup> There is more material available on Britain's East of Suez strategy. Balfour-Paul in *The End of Empire in the Middle East* considers that from 1945 the basic attitudes to empire had changed and instead a new conviction grew "that Britain was still responsible for the security of Western interests East of Suez" and this became "the main compulsion" for maintaining strategic facilities and military interests.<sup>17</sup> Pickering in *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* claims these facilities "helped lubricate diplomatic relations in the area" which is evident from the Libya experience.<sup>18</sup> *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* by David Reynolds stresses the continued importance of British trade with the area East of Suez and argues that the facilities provided stability, a policy supported by the armed services.<sup>19</sup> Michael Dockrill's *British Defence Since 1945* notes that there was an assumption that Britain's role East of Suez, along with the important trade and investment opportunities, were actually dependent upon Britain's defence role worldwide which incorporated military bases and facilities in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and Far East.<sup>20</sup> The British continued to maintain a military presence in Libya because of these economic concerns and

---

<sup>15</sup> J. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International Policy* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 108-109.

<sup>16</sup> S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> G. Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> J. Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (Basingstoke/New York, 1998), pp. 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> D. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford, 1988).

because they helped diplomatic relations between London and Tripoli during the 1960s.

Edward Spiers' 'The Significance of the Suez Canal for Western Strategy since 1956' considers that during the 1950s and early 1960s the East of Suez role was "steadily upgraded", explained by a requirement to honour commitments, undertake peacekeeping missions and preserve an economic stake in the region.<sup>21</sup> Darwin's 'British Decolonisation since 1945' concurs that the "East of Suez role conformed well with the instinct, common to politicians of both major parties, to retain Britain's great power spheres of influence – for just a little longer".<sup>22</sup> But, as Garnett states in 'British Strategic Thought', "no one asked what the facilities were for or whether the traditional imperial role was sustainable".<sup>23</sup> Frankel's work, *British Foreign Policy* indicates that the facilities constituted commitments, power and influence and no government could give up such assets "voluntarily". Frankel believes instead "adjustment piecemeal" followed in response to a range of pressures but the value of facilities remained unresolved.<sup>24</sup> Young considers that even in the early years of the Labour Government, prestige, anti-communism and alliance commitments helped to "justify a global presence" and ministers took time to adjust to Britain's changing economic and political fortunes. Young points out policy-makers were beset with uncertainties about "sparkling new crises, upsetting allies and damaging British influence" by changing the status quo.<sup>25</sup> Wilson himself considered the East of Suez role integral to British

---

<sup>21</sup> E.M. Spiers, 'The Significance of the Suez Canal for Western Strategy since 1956', in K Wilson, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Middle East, the Anglo-Egyptian Experience, 1882-1982* (London, 1983), p.150.

<sup>22</sup> J. Darwin, 'British Decolonisation since 1945', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22 (1984), 207.

<sup>23</sup> J. Garnett, 'British Strategic Thought', in J Bayliss (ed.), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London, 1977), p.168.

<sup>24</sup> J. Frankel, *British Foreign Policy, 1945-1973* (London, 1975), p.155.

<sup>25</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p.56.

strategy and stated in June 1966 that “if we abdicate responsibility, who will exercise that role?”<sup>26</sup>

In the 1960s the East of Suez policy was increasingly criticised, as the facilities became an expense the British economy struggled to finance. Sanders’ extensive work, *Losing An Empire Finding a Role* identifies “Cabinet shifts, alterations in the machinery of government and policy calculation played equally an important role” in a revised view of facilities.<sup>27</sup> Balfour-Paul notes that “Labour Party leaders.....were increasingly exposed to the hostility of party ideologists to the practice of empire”.<sup>28</sup> The whole intellectual concept of military facilities was queried. These critiques questioned the cost of fighting against nationalist groups and maintaining deployments despite opposition within the host country. Furthermore doubts over the practical strategic concept of the defence of British interests through overseas facilities were raised whilst there was a psychological withdrawal from political and economic imperial-centric notions of Britain’s role in the world, as the Atlantic Alliance and Europe grew to be at the core of British security.<sup>29</sup>

Pham’s *Ending East of Suez* sets out to explain how the Wilson Government came to decide to withdraw Britain from its global commitments. His focus is on the withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore. Pham notes that, like the Libyan deployments, the bases in Malaysia and Singapore served some strategic and political interests because they helped maintain Western interests in the region. The presence also embodied Britain’s alliance with the US. However, these benefits were undermined by the regional hostility they attracted and the difficult political position

---

<sup>26</sup> ‘Mr Wilson puts case on Britain’s defence role’, *The Times*, 16 June 1966, 11.

<sup>27</sup> D. Sanders, *Losing An Empire Finding a Role* (London, 1990), pp. 228, 115-129.

<sup>28</sup> Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire*, p.124.

<sup>29</sup> Sanders, *Losing An Empire*, pp. 228, 115-129. S Croft, A Dorman, W Rees, Muttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000. A Policy Revaluation* (Harlow, 2001), p. 38.

they put their host countries in. Furthermore the cost of maintaining these bases began to outweigh the benefits enjoyed.<sup>30</sup> Pham states that the Labour Government was initially supportive of the East of Suez role but policy changes resulted from the political consequences of the 1967 devaluation and its aftermath. The “old structure of authority” of Wilson, Callaghan and Brown broke down. This was a grouping that had maintained the remnants of Britain’s East of Suez role before devaluation. Thereafter, with Roy Jenkins as Chancellor and a leading figure in Wilson’s Government a “new order” in Cabinet “required the elimination of Britain’s international role as a symbolic sacrifice before Britain would accede to major social cuts to shore up the country’s financial base” as a result of devaluation.<sup>31</sup>

Pham claims that the archival records show that the Chancellor’s strategy for getting a comprehensive package of cuts through Cabinet was to demand defence suffer heavy reductions first. The other components of this package, including the introduction of prescription charges and postponement of the raising of the school leaving age “conflicted with deeply held Labour ideals”. Jenkins was only able to have major social cuts approved by a deeply apprehensive Cabinet by ensuring that defence policy was sacrificed at the outset. In conclusion empire was abolished as a political necessity before a Labour Government “could contemplate reducing the welfare states benefits”, rather than paving the way for a welfare state.<sup>32</sup>

Britain’s experience in Libya is not dissimilar to the calculations and considerations attendant to the withdrawal from other facilities in the Arab world. In 1966 Elisabeth Monroe in ‘British facilities in the Middle East; Assets or Liabilities?’ believed the British presence to be an embarrassment, and for Michael Howard in ‘Britain’s strategic problem East of Suez’ the Gulf facilities were “inescapable liabilities rather

---

<sup>30</sup> P.I. Pham, *Ending East of Suez* (Oxford, 2010), p.7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.

than Imperial assets".<sup>33</sup> However, as Simon Smith has shown in 'Power Transferred? Britain, the United States and the Gulf, 1956-1971' Washington was reluctant to take over Britain's responsibilities, particularly in the Gulf and urged the British to maintain as much of a "non military" presence as possible, tied down as the United States was with a growing involvement in the war in Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> This was also the case in Libya.

Tore Petersen's work stresses the continued importance to Washington of Britain's role East of Suez, the strength of Sterling and a British presence in Germany which supplemented US global strategy. He argues that Wilson and the Labourites were intent "on ending the UK's overseas commitments for reasons of ideology". The poor shape of the economy was "just an added inducement to speed up the withdrawal process". Whilst the Labour Government "was flexible in the ways and means the decision was implemented" they hid their "intentions in rhetoric committed to empire".<sup>35</sup>

Petersen's work focuses upon the Middle East where the UK had cooperated with the USA supplementing and complementing each other especially in Egypt, Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>36</sup> Post war Prime Ministers had attempted to keep the Middle East within the UK's sphere of influence and Britain's position as a great power relied upon the significance of British power in that region.<sup>37</sup> From 1964 Labour's "predisposition to liquidate the empire was hidden by the fig leaf of financial exigency" to remedy chronic economic problems. As a result the pound and the British role East

---

<sup>33</sup> E. Monroe, 'British facilities in the Middle East; Assets or Liabilities?', *International Affairs*, 42 (1966), 24-34. M. Howard, 'Britain's strategic problem East of Suez', *International Affairs*, 42 (1966), 10.

<sup>34</sup> S.C. Smith, 'Power Transferred? Britain, the United States and the Gulf 1956-1971', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 1-23.

<sup>35</sup> T. Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East 1961-1969, A Willing Retreat* (Eastbourne, 2006), p.2.

<sup>36</sup> T. Petersen, *The Decline*, p.3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

of Suez were intimately tied to Anglo-American relations. In order to gain American assistance to maintain the stability of the currency, the British pledged to remain East of Suez. The United States “worked assiduously to dissuade Britain from cutting its overseas defence commitments”. However, Petersen considers the succession of defence reviews was actually a concerted act “to divest Britain of its bases East of Suez” and he believes they represented “a remarkable coherent argument for the British withdrawal East of Suez”. Petersen believes London was ultimately able to disengage from global commitments whilst extracting support for the pound.<sup>38</sup>

Of specific relevance to this study is Petersen’s focus on the withdrawal from the Persian Gulf; oil rich British base areas ruled by monarchs supported by London in much the same way as in Libya. Britain’s treaties with sheiks and sultans enabled the British to take charge of their defence and foreign affairs and maintain military bases in Bahrain, Sharjah, and in the case of Oman, Maisrah Island and Oman itself. Petersen believes, like Pham, that the withdrawal from the Gulf sheikdoms had little to do with saving money, but was necessary to get left-wing acceptance for cuts in domestic social spending to balance the budget after the pound was devalued in 1967. The decision to leave the Gulf was based on “domestic exigencies”. British investment in the region was small considering the oil wealth emerging from it but “Labour seized every opportunity to dismantle the empire and refused to explore any political or economic opportunities to remain”. British policy was “one dimensionally ideologically committed to the end of empire”.<sup>39</sup>

A defining moment for Britain’s military influence in the Middle East appears to be the Six Day War, which also had consequences for British facilities in Libya. In Keir Thorpe’s article on the Six Day War and oil embargo, the war “helped to confirm...the British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf” because military bases failed to be of any use during the conflict. In July 1967 the Cabinet noted that “our military presence

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 60, 66, 67.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 77.

there was of no value to our economic interests” which “lay primarily in the Arab countries”. Thorpe claims “the 1967 oil crisis is a clear marker in the shift in British relations with the Middle East, finally stepping away from the remnants of formal imperialism, backed by a military presence, to a profitable, purely commercial relationship”.<sup>40</sup> Brenchley’s text *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* recognizes that Wilson’s failed bid to avert the Six Day War and keep open the Gulf of Aqaba was a result of the much reduced strength of Britain’s defence forces, which made a unilateral act impossible without American support. The events of 1967 in the Middle East, were in Brenchley’s consideration, the last time the British took a leading part, if unsuccessfully, in Middle Eastern affairs. As the experience in Libya shows, Britain’s policy priorities were now focused on economic considerations and Brenchley considers “these could be pursued without undue involvement in the political problems of the area”.<sup>41</sup> Abba Eban, Israeli diplomat and politician, went so far as to state that Wilson and “his colleagues came to terms with Britain’s dwindling power in the Middle East and gave short shrift to the Arabists who still dreamed of a Pax Britannica sustained by friendly Arab clients”.<sup>42</sup> Young agrees that Britain’s inability to play a role in the Six Day War , as well as the withdrawal from Aden “seemed to show the country was unable to project military power in the region effectively” and the Labour Government “saw a shift from a policy built on a regional military presence, close ties to traditional rulers and opposition to Nasserism, to one that sought to protect British interests through a military withdrawal, acceptance that the days of the Sultan and sheikhs might be numbered and a readiness to come to terms with radical leaders particularly in the Gulf”. This policy was illustrated by the withdrawal from Aden, improved diplomatic relations with Egypt, the withdrawal from the Gulf, as well as disengagement from the Arab-Israeli conflict. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office study in 1969 even went so far as to call for a less “forthright” policy in the Middle

---

<sup>40</sup> K. Thorpe, ‘The Forgotten Shortage: Britain’s handling of the 1967 Oil embargo’, *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2009), 201-222.

<sup>41</sup> F. Brenchley, *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* (London, 2005), p. 127.

<sup>42</sup> A. Morgan, *Harold Wilson, A Life* (London, 1992), 309.

East, whilst another paper called for Britain operating through NATO in the Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup> However, total disengagement proved an elusive goal, given that the British maintained considerable economic interests in the region.

The Labour Government's foreign and defence policy has been widely studied. At the centre of the foreign policy making process was Harold Wilson. Helen Parr notes in 'Britain, America, East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy, 1964-1967' that his colleagues have identified Wilson as "vain" and "easily seduced by the opportunity to strut upon the international stage", holding a belief he could produce results where others had failed. He overstated Britain's status and "shared the grandiose notions of the Labour Left...believing in the moral weight of British foreign policy to bring good to the world".<sup>44</sup> John Young identifies the nature of the decision-making process in Cabinet and Wilson's significance. Wilson allowed meetings to "talk themselves out" with "conclusions being reached through sheer boredom". In theory, Cabinet ministers could comment on foreign affairs, but relatively little was considered in Cabinet, other than an oral update. Richard Crossman's diaries identified early in the first government that Gordon Walker, Wilson's first Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, would talk to the Prime Minister first and they would agree on what to discuss or keep quiet about.<sup>45</sup>

Ziegler, Wilson's biographer, notes Wilson's tendency to display a disproportionate amount of time upon periodic crises, more "than his closest advisors thought was proper" and Wilson was greatly interested in specific foreign policy issues such as UDI

---

<sup>43</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p.108; Planning Working Party, Five principles for British Middle Eastern Policy, PWP(69)7, 16 December 1969, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, FCO 49/260, National Archives, London. Draft memorandum, 11 December 1969, FCO 49/270

<sup>44</sup> H. Parr, 'Britain America East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy, 1964-1967', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 403,404.

<sup>45</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, pp. 4, 17.

in Rhodesia and the Biafran war.<sup>46</sup> Wilson took interest in the sale of Chieftain tanks to Libya and frequently reminded his ministers of his concerns or asked for updates on progress. Hennessy, in his work on British Prime ministers notes that Wilson worked to remove the most strategic decision-making opportunities from the purview of the full Cabinet.<sup>47</sup> This was possibly because, as Ziegler notes, Wilson was anxious that ministers did not play too much of a potentially disruptive role in formulating foreign policy, split as the Cabinet was between ministers from Left and Right. Ziegler notes that Wilson warned his Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart that he was anxious to keep discussion about the Nigerian civil war out of Cabinet fearing an “intolerable situation” which would put “foreign policy much more into commission in the Cabinet than we could accept; and we might find that, having once tasted blood, they would subject other issues .....to the same treatment”.<sup>48</sup>

Wilson’s approach led to accusations that he did not welcome forward thinking.<sup>49</sup> He appeared to show little vision or long term outlook and Britain’s foreign and defence policy by 1970 had, as Young claims been “achieved more by muddle and a collapse of alternatives than any long-term vision”.<sup>50</sup> Wilson therefore has been considered to have “had no clear sense of direction, no idea of where the country must head”.<sup>51</sup> Healey, his Secretary of State for Defence believed Wilson lacked a clear strategy for “he had no sense of direction, and rarely looked more than a few months ahead. His short-term opportunism, allied to a capacity for self-delusion.....often plunged the Government into chaos”.<sup>52</sup> However, O’Hara and Parr

---

<sup>46</sup> P. Ziegler, *Wilson the Authorised Life* (London, 1995), p. 343.

<sup>47</sup> P. Hennessy, *The British Prime Minister, The Office and its Holders since 1945* (London, 2000), p. 289.

<sup>48</sup> Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 339.

<sup>49</sup> Hennessey, *The British Prime Minister*, p. 289.

<sup>50</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> Parr, ‘Britain America East of Suez and the EEC’, 404.

<sup>52</sup> D. Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1991), p. 331.

in their introductory article 'The Fall and Rise of a Reputation' consider that much of Wilson's problems were a consequence of tactics rather than strategy.<sup>53</sup> Further explained in Parr's 'Britain, America, East of Suez and the EEC', Wilson's policy was apparently grounded in strategic rationale and geared towards retaining British independence and bolstering Britain's influence in Europe and the USA. In the 1960s Britain turned from a foreign and defence policy strategy focused East of Suez to a European orientation. This enabled the Labour Government to "shore up Britain's position in the world". Wilson, "having embarked on an internationalist policy... altered this policy in response to domestic, political considerations".<sup>54</sup> But John Young's article 'International Factors and the 1964 election' considers this strategy more reactive than proactive for "once in power Labour failed to cut back quickly enough on defence, hopes of Commonwealth cooperation came to nothing and by 1967 Wilson was thrown back on another attempt to enter the EEC". This policy failed and the strategic policy of East of Suez collapsed. Young concludes that the Government's foreign policy had "the sense of being controlled by events rather than controlling them".<sup>55</sup> Hughes in *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* claims that the conduct of Labour's defence policy was not governed by an "appraisal of where the UK's interests lay but through a process of "muddling through" and whilst the withdrawal from East of Suez did have a strategic rationale its management "had all the characteristics of a scuttle".<sup>56</sup>

It must also be remembered that Wilson managed a Cabinet with conflicting interpretations of Britain's foreign and defence role. Young identifies Secretary to the Cabinet, Burke Trend, as having great influence. Trend realized that "Britain could no

---

<sup>53</sup> G. O'Hara and H. Parr, 'Introduction: the Fall and Rise of a Reputation', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Parr, 'Britain America East of Suez and the EEC', 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> J.W.Young, 'International Factors and the 1964 election', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 351-371.

<sup>56</sup> Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War*, p. 111.

longer play a world role". Young also identifies that from 1968 to 1970 Wilson also came to rely more on his final Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, than any other minister, but Stewart himself showed little radicalism in foreign affairs.<sup>57</sup> Richard Crossman recognised that Wilson and Stewart only allowed foreign policy issues to be debated at DOPC when there was disagreement between the two ministers.<sup>58</sup> Conversely the Foreign Secretary from August 1966 to March 1968, George Brown, with whom Wilson had a stormy relationship, was more visionary about Britain's future and was pro-withdrawal from East of Suez whilst supporting entry into the EEC. Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Callaghan was supportive of the Commonwealth and the role East of Suez whilst his successor in 1967, Roy Jenkins, who was on the Right of the Labour Government, was for joining the European Common Market and firmly against Britain's presence East of Suez. Young notes that Wilson has been recognized as "not lacking in principle or idealism" but his Government generally followed a traditional course in foreign policy.<sup>59</sup> This led to accusations of hypocrisy, particularly from the Left. The supply of arms to the military regime in Greece led Cabinet member Richard Crossman to claim, in his diary, that Wilson and Stewart were "smug people" who combined "high moral principle with highly expedient practice".<sup>60</sup> Wilson also had to contend with the strong Left-wing of the party which was anti-American, internationalist, anti-capitalist and an ardent critic of the Government's policy. Helen Parr believes that over time individuals and the Left-wing of the party, with a more domestic orientated agenda, came to have increasing influence, as Wilson's apparent delusion of grandeur was worn away by the "realities of office".<sup>61</sup> As Wrigley identifies in 'Now you see it, now you don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's foreign policy 1964-1970', Wilson's foreign policy has to be seen against the back-ground of "interlinked political needs". These "needs" included other international

---

<sup>57</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> R. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol. 3*, (London, 1977), p.787.

<sup>59</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 344.

<sup>61</sup> Parr, 'Britain America East of Suez and the EEC', 403.

issues, the opinion of the Labour movement, party and unions, national opinion and threats to his leadership. Wilson sought to maintain the Labour Government in power and pursue policies that did not cleave the party and the Cabinet into two.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> C. Wrigley, 'Now you see it, now you don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's foreign policy 1964-1970', in R. Cooney, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Wilson Governments 1964- 1970* (London, 1993), p. 125.

## 1.4 Britain and Libya 1945 to 1964

From 1912 to 1943 the territory of modern Libya had been under Italian colonial rule. During this period the indigenous people had waged an armed struggle against the 150,000 Italians who had settled mainly in the northern lands of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Idris, the Chief of the religious Senussi order led Libyan resistance to this occupation, which was eventually ended, in cooperation with the British, in 1943. From 1943 to 1951 Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were placed under British administration, whilst the French held the Fezzan region in the south. The Italians relinquished all claims to the country in 1947.<sup>63</sup>

When the Second World War ended in 1945 London considered Libya to be of great strategic value to defence and foreign policy in the Middle East. As Alison Pargeter has recognised, Libya was considered part of this region, which itself was the centre of strategic defence planning for Britain's global presence. With the loss of the Palestine Mandate in 1948 and uncertainty over the future of Britain's Suez bases, Libya gained increasing importance for it enabled the British to maintain a presence in the region and consequently great power status.<sup>64</sup> Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary wrote in August 1945 that "in view of the potential strategic value of Cyrenaica.... it is highly desirable that the territory should be brought under British influence".<sup>65</sup> Libya was also considered part of the Eastern Mediterranean, a politically fragile area given the communist threat to Turkey and Greece. Finally, Libya bordered Egypt and the strategically sensitive Suez Canal. As Pargeter has noted, Libya was a nation that "the Western powers could not afford to let slip into the Soviet

---

<sup>63</sup> G Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke/New York, 1996), pp 142-144.

<sup>64</sup> Pargeter, 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis', 41.

<sup>65</sup> M. Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power* (London, 1995), p.10.

camp". After the Second World War Moscow showed interest in gaining a trusteeship in the territory or at least influencing the future political development of the region.<sup>66</sup>

From 1945 London was instrumental in the creation of a pro-Western Libyan regime to secure Britain's strategic position. This goal complemented Washington's strategic concerns in the region and the Americans supported the idea of permanent British bases in Cyrenaica to thwart Soviet interests in the Mediterranean. Washington even considered drawing Libya into the NATO Alliance, so important was its strategic value.<sup>67</sup> William Roger Louis has called the Anglo-US role in creation of Libya as "an unblushing venture of military and economic imperialism".<sup>68</sup> Saul Kelly states that for Washington and London:

"the fulfilment of their strategic requirements depended upon a satisfactory outcome, namely the creation of a federal state which would safeguard British-American influence in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. The creation of a client state was intended to bolster Britain's predominant position in the Middle East, its status as a world power and its influence within the American dominated North Atlantic alliance".<sup>69</sup>

However, Kelly points out that it was noticeable during this period that the US "balked at British attempts to persuade it to assume some responsibility" for Libya, instead "preferring that the British Government should bear the burden of protecting US strategic interests".<sup>70</sup> Washington was to follow this line during the 1960s.

---

<sup>66</sup> Pargeter, 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis', 41.

<sup>67</sup> R. B. St John, *Libya and the United States* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 59-61.

<sup>68</sup> W. R. Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Post War Imperialism* (London, 1984), p. 305.

<sup>69</sup> S. Kelly, *Cold War in the Desert* (London, 2000), p. 170.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

The opportunity to secure strategic interests in Libya came when a UN plan for a British, Italian and French trusteeship in May 1949 failed to obtain the support of a voting majority at the UN General Assembly. The only option left was independence, particularly as the Anglo-Italian trustee plan had been met with civil disobedience in Tripoli and demonstrations of support for the Soviet Union. British officials decided it would be best to "climb on the band wagon".<sup>71</sup> This did not mean the British had resigned themselves to genuine Libyan independence because the country would now become, in many respects, a British client state.<sup>72</sup> Libya's subservient political and defence status was a consequence of the political system that the British had devised in the country. From the end of the war the British Military Administration of the region had been supportive of the political ambitions of the now Emir, Idris of Cyrenaica. In September 1949 Britain announced that it was giving Cyrenaica full responsibility for its internal affairs, under the authority of Idris, effectively declaring that an independent Libya "would take only the form that Idris, Britain and Britain's Western allies wanted: a federal monarchy under the Senussi crown".<sup>73</sup> By backing Idris Britain could exercise "a kind of informal colonialism".<sup>74</sup> This practice was in keeping with Britain's policy of courting influence amongst traditional, political elites in the Arab world and the Senussi were "an ideal basis for the application of this pattern in Libya".<sup>75</sup>

On 1 January 1951 Libya attained independence and on 29 July 1953 an Anglo-Libyan political relationship was formalized in the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. In accordance with article two of the treaty the parties agreed to come to the aid of the

---

<sup>71</sup> The United States and Libya Part 1: Before Gaddafi. Foreign Relations of the United States 1949, vol. 4, 569-70. Cited in <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb1.html> [3 April 2004].

<sup>72</sup> W. R. Louis, 'American Anti-colonialism and the Dissolution of the British Empire', *International Affairs*, 61 (1985), 404.

<sup>73</sup> Wright, *Libya*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>74</sup> Pargeter, 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis', 42.

<sup>75</sup> R. First, *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (London, 1974), p. 68.

other as “a measure of collective defence”.<sup>76</sup> Article two of the Anglo-Libyan treaty was clarified in a classified “secret” note, termed the Kirkbride note, after the British Ambassador to Libya at the time. It made clear to the Libyan Government, the Foreign Office considered, “that in the event of war or threat of war Her Majesty’s Government will do all they can to defend Libya”.<sup>77</sup> The note emphatically stated that there was “no doubt” that article two of the treaty did imply “the provision of military assistance”.<sup>78</sup>

The treaty did not require the British to deploy military forces in Libya for this purpose, but under article three of the treaty both agreed to “furnish” “facilities” in order that each country could “play their part in the maintenance of international peace and security”.<sup>79</sup> British military deployments from 1953 consisted of airbases and landing strips at Tripoli, Benina and El Adem and army deployments in Tripoli, Homs, Barce and Derna. Article three gave rise to the “Agreement on Military Facilities” which entitled the British to extensive jurisdictional and extraterritorial rights in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, as well as allowing the use of land for extensive military purposes and training. Under article one of the “Agreement on Military Facilities”, Libya and Britain agreed to their two armed forces working together “to secure efficiency in cooperation and uniformity” of training and equipment. This article allowed the British to promote weapons sales and gave rise to the creation of military missions in the country operated by the British Army and the Royal Navy. The British were also granted over-flight and staging facilities in Libya.<sup>80</sup>

The military missions were to be of great value for promoting the sale of arms but also encouraged military and political relations between Britain and Libya and enabled

---

<sup>76</sup> Anglo-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, Cmnd 8914 (London, 1953).

<sup>77</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell and P G A Wakefield, 28 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>78</sup> Kirkbride Note, British Legation, Benghazi, 29 July 1953, FCO 39/119.

<sup>79</sup> Anglo-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, Cmnd 8914 (London, 1953).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

the British to play a role in the development of the King's armed forces. The Libyan armed forces had their origin in the Libyan Arab Forces raised by British authorities in Egypt during the Second World War. The army preferred to be known as the Senussi army and were reluctant to be disbanded after the war and as a result were transferred to the Cyrenaican police force. After independence they then transferred to the newly created Royal Libyan Army. As the army grew after 1952 politically less trusted city dwellers joined the conservative tribal members of the military. The King grew to be distrustful of the army and relied increasingly on Cyrenaican officers, who owed him personal loyalty, to fill important command positions whilst his forces were organised on regional and tribal lines. To neutralise any potential threat to his authority the army was balanced by regional police forces in the country. For example, the mobile National Security Force and the Cyrenaican Defence Force, which were recruited from tribes loyal to the King's own Senussi clan, had a combined strength of 14,000 men and their armour was very similar to that of the army.<sup>81</sup> The Defence Force's role, Wright considers, was to "protect the monarchy from armed insurrection" or an attempted coup by the army. Tripolitania raised a police force of 4200 men, which merged with the Fezzan force in 1963 into a single National Security Force".<sup>82</sup> British Ambassador Sarrell brought to the attention of the Foreign Office in September 1967 the apparent disloyalty of "certain officers" in the Libya army. He reported that Idris "mistrusts the Libyan army and probably always will" but would never purge it of disloyal elements lest that action "remove the very divisions within the army which it has been his policy to preserve".<sup>83</sup>

The British role in the shape of the military missions involved a naval mission tasked with building up Libyan coastal defences and was mainly advisory, virtually running the Libyan navy following agreement in London in November 1962 to create a

---

<sup>81</sup> A. H. Cordesman , *A Tragedy of Arms: Military and Security Developments in the Maghreb* (Westport, 2002), p. 216.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 93.

<sup>83</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 1 September 1967, FCO 39/102

Libyan navy although this never grew beyond 200 personnel.<sup>84</sup> The military mission provided advice to the Libyan army. The Head of the British military mission was “directly responsible to the Ambassador” and was to “advise and assist” the Libyan defence minister “in all matters” connected with development, equipment and training of the Libyan army.<sup>85</sup> The missions were also involved in promoting and organising joint training exercises in the Libyan desert where British hardware was demonstrated and marketed to the Libyan armed forces. Expatriate technicians were loaned to the Libyan army under the auspices of the military assistance office. The British military mission had their headquarters in Benghazi with a smaller detachment in Tripoli. The British naval mission was based in Tripoli. The missions also enabled the British to monitor the Libyan regime, particularly the military forces, if somewhat obliquely. Idris forbade the use of military attaches in Libya and the British Chiefs of Staff held firm to the notion that “training missions should not be charged with tasks involving the collection of intelligence”.<sup>86</sup> However Blundy and Lycett quote an unnamed British NCO who claimed “we were there not really to train the army but to keep an eye on it, to find out what was really going on. We made regular reports about it to the British Embassy people. I felt for a long time that something pretty drastic was going to happen”.<sup>87</sup> By the mid 1960s Simons notes that “many observers perceived that the situation was ripe for revolution” and this encouraged the British not to arm the Libyan army too heavily because it was considered “that many of the Libyan Officers were interested in politics and much influenced by talk of Arab Nationalism”. Therefore it appears that, as the Head of the Royal Libyan Military Academy in Benghazi from 1960 to 1966 Colonel Lough stated: “our policy was not to arm them too well”.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> Draft Future role of the British Military Mission Report, 12 February 1969, FCO 39/413

<sup>86</sup> DCDS (I), Overt intelligence collection in Libya, 7 November 1969, FCO 39/414.

<sup>87</sup> D. Blundy and A. Lycett, *Gaddafi and the Libyan Revolution* (London, 1987), p. 48.

<sup>88</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p.173.

Lough claims that the King “feared his army” and would not even allow them to use six Centurion tanks provided by the British.<sup>89</sup>

British involvement in the armed forces of Libya went further. London set up the Libyan Military Academy in Benghazi in 1957 as Simons points out “to serve under British guidance”. Simons further elaborates that “it was assumed that the necessary quotas of reliable pro-Western officers could be generated in such an institution”. The revolution of the 1 September 1969 which over-threw the monarchy was led by Captain Muammar Gaddafi who had enrolled in the Military Academy and attended a military training course in Britain on signals, driving maintenance and gunnery.<sup>90</sup> Simons also claims that army officers were monitored, pointing out that there was a “detailed dossier” on Gaddafi going back to 1966. Colonel Aziz Shenib, number three in the Libyan army, stated that Gaddafi’s plot was actually well know amongst senior officers. Such dissension, which appeared common and which the regime feared could lead to a successful coup, was dealt with by a policy of moving officers around posts frequently.<sup>91</sup>

Under article three of the treaty it was recognised that in return for military facilities the British agreed to provide long-term budgetary assistance, which amounted to a subsidy totalling £3,750,000 per annum from 1953. This subsidy would be reviewed every five years and gave Britain tremendous political leverage over Libya because the country was poor and entirely dependent on foreign financial assistance.<sup>92</sup> In the 1950s Washington concluded that Libya was “under heavy British influence” and “the sheer fact of her pressing needs makes Libya a veritable bargain basement, where

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.

<sup>90</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 43.

<sup>91</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, pp. 157-8.

<sup>92</sup> Anglo-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, Cmnd 8914 (London, 1953).

extraordinary values can be had at a very low cost".<sup>93</sup> The United States also acquired military facilities in Libya, secured under the US-Libyan agreement of December 1954. The agreement entailed no defence commitment from Washington, although the presence of American forces on Libyan soil at the Wheelus air base reassured the security concerns of the Libyan Government. The base also demonstrated an American presence in the Middle East and Mediterranean, providing support for potential air operations in the region.<sup>94</sup>

Franco-Libyan relations were also formalised at this time. In 1954 the French maintained a limited troop presence in Libya at Sheba, Ghat and Ghadames in the southern Fezzan district of Libya. Faced with hostility from Libyan nationalists towards French policies in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia the Libyan Government signed a treaty of "friendship and good-neighbourliness" with Paris in August 1955. This agreement stipulated the withdrawal of French troops by the end of November 1956 whilst the French would continue to have air and transit rights over and through Libya, in return for contributions to Libyan development spending. Without the troop presence the area became a transit point for the smuggling of arms from Egypt to Algeria in support of the uprising against French rule.<sup>95</sup>

Returning to the Anglo-Libyan relationship, the treaty was underscored by the political relationship between the Libyan monarchy and British diplomats. This relationship was particularly close and King Idris, who held considerable power in the country, had strong affection for the British as a result of his war time experiences and he looked to London for his own personal security. In return the treaty and relationship enabled the British to secure military facilities in Libya and support

---

<sup>93</sup> The United States and Libya Part 1: Before Gaddafi, FRUS 1952-54, vol. 9, 383, FRUS , 1955-57, vol. 18, 459. Cited in <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb1.html> [3 April 2004].

<sup>94</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p 169.

<sup>95</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p.142.

Britain's wider defence strategy. Article three of the treaty affirmed that the facilities would enable Britain and Libya to "play their part in the maintenance of international peace and security". Initially these deployments were to be peacetime locations for forces which could not be stationed in Egypt. Blackwell considers Libya was "a key tool in protecting Britain's interests in the Middle East" and "an essential link" in plans to defend the region.<sup>96</sup> Additionally Pargeter believes that the facilities were "a vital component in Britain's strategy of maintaining Western regimes in the Middle East that would counter Arab Nationalism and provide convenient facilities for use against radical Arab states where necessary".<sup>97</sup> In this case the perceived enemy was the Prime Minister and later President of Egypt, General Nasser. Blackwell agrees that "the retention of troops in Cyrenaica.....was intended to maintain pressure on Cairo following the 1954 (Anglo-Egyptian) agreement" whilst Libya's regional position "led to an increased Anglo-American emphasis on the country as a pro-Western bulwark against the Cairo regime".<sup>98</sup> The facilities also provided Britain with alternative military bases following the Anglo-Egyptian agreement of 1954 which resulted in a British evacuation from the Suez Canal Zone. The British military presence demonstrated London's commitment not just to Libya but to other conservative, monarchical Arab states, whilst serving, on a purely military basis, to deter Egypt from seeking to attack Libya. The facilities, by symbolising Britain's military commitment to Libya, also served to counter a very low level, anti -Idris, subversive threat sponsored by Egypt, at least in the eyes of British planners.<sup>99</sup> The 1953 treaty did not require the British to intervene in internal affairs but the strategic value of the country was such that the

---

<sup>96</sup> Blackwell, 'Saving the King', 1.

<sup>97</sup> Pargeter, 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis', 42.

<sup>98</sup> Blackwell, 'Saving the King', 3-4.

<sup>99</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British Troops, 9 June 1966, Foreign Office, FO 371/190492, National Archives, London.

British were willing, up until the late 1950s, to restore the King or a friendly government in the event of a revolution having taken place.<sup>100</sup>

Even from its conception the newly independent Libyan state was split by internal opposition to the constitutional set-up and the regime was criticised for the close relations maintained with the Western powers. Simons notes that the “sweeping constitutional powers of King Idris were frequently abused” and the regime was a “vehicle for continued Western Hegemony in the region” on a model similar to the Hashemite Kingdom in Jordan.<sup>101</sup> Simons also notes that nationalists were unhappy with the federal basis of the constitution which would continue to be dominated by “traditional forces, not least by the ever-present European powers”. The three provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Fezzan were given excessive powers and the King “represented an unwelcome constraint on democratic development”. Libya was “heavily committed to the West” and this would be a “fundamental cause” of the revolution in September 1969. Tribal leaders and “important urban political centres, often under the influence of the Arab Nationalists” were opposed to Idris’ installation as King. “Tensions between the old traditionalism and the new constitutionalism were quick to surface”. Prior to independence these tensions had already led to disputed elections in 1952 which the pro-Arab League Congress party claimed to have won. Congress party supporters invaded government buildings and the party was promptly banned. As a result multi-party politics in Libya “collapsed at the first test” and opposition operated on a clandestine basis. The government’s cabinet served the Palace and candidates in subsequent elections were “government nominees, and voting criteria were most characteristically tribal and nepotistic”. Some political opposition continued in sports clubs and trade unions although these were heavily circumscribed and repressed by the internal security forces. Simons claims “Britain continued to train and offer advice to the Libyan police forces and military, and there

---

<sup>100</sup> Annex A to Chiefs of Staff mtg (60) 203, Reinforced Theatre Plan, Middle East, no 6, 22 July 1959, Ministry of Defence, DEFE 7/2276, National Archives, London.

<sup>101</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 42.

was little doubt that the hostility of the Libyan Government to trade union organisation was supported by the British".<sup>102</sup> Opposition remained underground until the mid 1960s and was mainly republican in outlook, although the King was generally well respected as a figure. In 1961 the Libyan General Federation of Trade Unions was severely restricted by law and was "effectively cowed".<sup>103</sup> Wright recognises that it was then left to the students to take up the cause of opposition. This opposition was largely "shadowy, small and ineffective....disunited" but shared ideas of "national liberation, republicanism and Arab unity".<sup>104</sup> In April 1963 the federal basis of the constitution was abolished and the unification of the state, a "response to the country's need to develop oil riches and to achieve..... integration" actually gave the King and his close advisors and relations "inordinate power". However, "with a need to maintain political quiescence the regime turned towards large scale patronage and distributive measures" that were invariably corrupt and ineffective. In the meantime the Libyan authorities continued to suppress opposition.<sup>105</sup>

Western military presence in Libya soon became a political target for the opposition after independence. During the Suez crisis of 1956 public demonstrations against the British military presence were held and "threatened the country's internal stability". The British were warned by the Libyan Government that if the bases were used against the Egyptians then Tripoli would not be able to control popular discontent. Public reaction "was strong" with street demonstrations in August and in November this increased, "encouraged by Radio Cairo's incitement to violent action". Riots in Benghazi occurred and industrial action was called by dock workers who would not handle British goods. The Libyan regime found it difficult to balance its support for Arab nations as well as its support for the West who were "providing essential

---

<sup>102</sup> Simons, *Libya: The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., pp. 155-156, 158-159, 161.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, *Libya*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>105</sup> Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence*, pp. 51-52.

subsidies".<sup>106</sup> The British respected the Libyan demands which fell within one of the stipulations of the Treaty, namely article four which stated that nothing in the treaty should prejudice Libya's obligations to the Covenant of the League of Arab States. As a result the Libyans were entitled to forbid the use of the facilities if Britain chose to use them against another member of the League. In due course the ineffectiveness of the deployments for action against Nasser led London to conclude that the value of Libya was "much exaggerated" and that troop reduction, to save on defence expenditure, was possible whilst "leaving in a small force in Cyrenaica as a plate glass window against Egyptian invasion and perhaps to protect the King".<sup>107</sup> In 1957 the Cabinet decided that the commitment should be reduced to a minimum to safeguard the essential needs of the RAF and the staging facilities.<sup>108</sup> Simultaneously the British sought to "persuade the Americans to take on the main financial and military burden in Libya", exploiting Washington's increased commitment to containment of the Soviet threat in the Middle East. Washington attached great importance to the British continuing to contribute substantially to what they saw as a combined effort to keep Libya within the Western camp but was reluctant to mention any figure of financial support for Libya.<sup>109</sup> These issues were to reappear during the 1960s.

Despite the military restrictions and cost implications involved in maintaining British forces in Libya, the facilities were grafted onto Britain's wider strategic commitments, mainly as a result of the staging and over-flight facilities available. Libya was an integral part of the "east about" air route to the Middle East and Far East. This route consisted of two alternatives. Firstly there was the "northern route" across Cyprus,

---

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 45, 46.

<sup>107</sup> Blackwell, 'Saving the King', 6.

<sup>108</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, CC (57) 1 mtg, 15 January 1957, CAB 128/31, National Archives, London.

<sup>109</sup> CC (57) 8 mtg, memorandum on Anglo-American discussion on Libya, 12 -17 January, 27 January 1957, CAB 129/85. Memorandum, Talks with USA, January 15-17 January 1957, FO 371/126042.

Turkey, Iran, the Gulf and Gan for communication with forces in South East Asia and the Far East. The alternative was the “southern route” which included Libya, the Sudan and Aden. An alternative “west about” route, via the United States would only become viable once heavy transport C130s and VC10 aircraft came into service later in the 1960s.

These staging facilities were considered important to the East of Suez strategy that encompassed defence commitments in the Middle East and South East Asia. Within the Middle East, London had security commitments to Gulf States and to the Baghdad Pact. The Pact was a military alliance between Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and the UK created in 1955. The British were keen to encourage other Baghdad Pact countries to take interest in Libya.<sup>110</sup> During the 1950s officials urged the retention of British troops in Libya not just to check Nasser’s ambitions and maintain the King, but because they served this wider strategic role.<sup>111</sup> When the Baghdad Pact began to stall with the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 the British sent additional troops to Libya to reassure the King and conservative Arab regimes of continued British support. Plans to withdraw troops were shelved and a partial rather than a total withdrawal, as originally envisaged in the Defence White Paper of 1957, was implemented. London decided to station one major unit at Benghazi indefinitely and to reverse planned cutbacks in the subsidy. The Libyans were granted £3.25 million in aid and a programme for training and equipping the Libyan army was initiated with a military mission created in Benghazi for this purpose.<sup>112</sup> The Anglo-Libyan relationship was reaffirmed and Libya continued to be an important factor in British strategic calculations in the Middle East and for supporting Britain’s obligations to the

---

<sup>110</sup> JHA Watson, Foreign Service Officer to AS Halford, Consul-General, Benghazi, 18 April 1956, FO 371/119730.

<sup>111</sup> Annex A to Chiefs of Staff, COS (60) 203, Reinforced Theatre Plan, Middle East, No 6, 22 July 1959, DEFE 7/2276.

<sup>112</sup> Blackwell, ‘Saving the King’, 9-10.

Baghdad Pact, renamed CENTO in 1959 after the Iraqi withdrawal.<sup>113</sup> Libya's significance to Western strategic interests in the region increased with the rise of Pan-Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, the creation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958 and increased Soviet political, economic and military involvement in the Arab world. The staging and over-flying rights through Libya and the Sudan to Aden were considered particularly important for the defence of the Middle East and provided an air route to Kuwait, where the British landed troops in defence of the Emir in 1961.<sup>114</sup>

The facilities were also considered valuable to the East of Suez strategy into the Far East, once again providing vital staging facilities. The British East of Suez presence in this region comprised bases and military deployments in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong as well as defence commitments to the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and London was resolutely committed to these in the early 1960s. In 1962 the Macmillan Government recognised that, despite economic constraints, it was "clearly impossible ....to decide to reduce expenditure by abandoning any of our overseas commitments".<sup>115</sup> The 1961 Macmillan Future Policy Study had foreseen no change in policy on the Libyan facilities as the treaty was due to be reviewed in 1963, but economic and financial concerns regarding the funding of the facilities meant consideration had been given to reducing the subsidy along with a reduction of forces in Libya to save on overseas sterling expenditure.<sup>116</sup> Such consideration was headed off in 1962 when the Libyans asked for a postponement of the review of the treaty in the following year until 1965. Alec Douglas Home, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was happy to agree, because the facilities had become essential to British strategy East of Suez and to defence obligations to

---

<sup>113</sup> Pargeter, 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez crisis', 50-51.

<sup>114</sup> Report, British policy towards Libya, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>115</sup> Defence Committee, D(62) 1 Meeting, 12 January 1962, CAB 131/27

<sup>116</sup> Future Policy, FP (61) 2 mtg, 10 October 1961, memorandum, Libya garrison, 20 January 1961, DEFE 7/ 2276.

SEATO. Douglas Home considered it in Britain's interest to keep discussion of the treaty and military agreement to a minimum.<sup>117</sup>

The Service Chiefs stressed the importance of the Libyan facilities to British strategy East of Suez, whether in the Middle East or Far East. From their point of view none of the alternative routes through Turkey or across central Africa were satisfactory because they were not guaranteed. The Chiefs of Staff also attached great importance to the unique training rights the British had in Libya which allowed air movement practice for strategic reserves, tank training and bombing. A 1963 report on British policy towards Libya considered that the loss of "El Adem would mean the .....execution of defence policy anywhere East of Suez or indeed in the Levant ...would be rendered vastly more difficult" and "whilst the time would come to decide what facilities were needed, this would depend on whether "or not we maintain our present defence policy East of Suez and other issues such as the situation in Middle East and Libya".<sup>118</sup> As a result the facilities were framed firmly in the concept of an East of Suez strategy.

British policy, in line with the United States and other Western countries, was to keep Libya politically within the Western camp. The facilities were considered by British officials as a stabilizing factor in Libyan politics, because they reassured the King that he had military support and they posed a deterrent to anti-government forces. However, the British were not obliged by treaty to intervene in internal "conflicts" or even maintain a military presence in the country, and they showed less appetite to do so by the 1960s as the financial burden of maintaining facilities in Libya and elsewhere in the world came to weigh more heavily on policy decisions. The 1963 report on British policy towards Libya claimed it was "politically out of question" to use military force to establish whatever regime the British wished to see in Libya. London had a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Arab states. Such action in

---

<sup>117</sup> A Douglas-Home to H Macmillan, 31 December 1962, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>118</sup> Report, British policy towards Libya, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

Libya could be “self destructive” and lead to Britain being “discredited in Libya and throughout the Arab world”. Instead the British were now happy to maintain the “freedom to respond to changes of political circumstances” in order to secure treaty rights with any successor regime they could work with. The very minimum facilities the London considered important to hold onto were the strategically important over-flying and staging rights.<sup>119</sup> These considerations were to play a significant role in London’s approach to the revolution’s leaders in September 1969.

During the early 1960s Britain’s position in Libya became vulnerable as the Idris regime failed to address the anti-Western and pro-Arab sympathies of a population heavily influenced by Nasserite Pan Arabism. The conservative monarchy in Libya also discovered itself to be strategically isolated from similar regimes in the Arab world, sandwiched between Egypt and newly independent Algeria. Internal opposition had been largely quashed or had become clandestine but the “main threat to the monarchy .....appeared to be foreign rather than domestic”.<sup>120</sup>

A threat to Libya came from the west and was posed by Algeria which considered itself a revolutionary state, with a “duty to spread revolt” against colonialism. This persuasion was born of its struggle against the French colonists led by the National Liberation Front. This political party developed strong relations with the newly independent states of Tunisia, Morocco and Nasser’s Egypt.<sup>121</sup> Algeria was considered a significant threat to Western interests from the very first days of its independence. It became “one of the most visible and admired of the third world” countries.<sup>122</sup> Under the leadership of Ahmed Ben Bella the precedent of backing revolutionary groups that “openly advocated the use of terrorism” was established and

---

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 94.

<sup>121</sup> M. Stone, *The Agony of Algeria* (London, 1997), p. 228.

<sup>122</sup> J.J. Byrne, ‘Our Own Special Brand of Socialism: Algeria and the Contest of Modernities in the 1960s’, *Diplomatic History*, 33 (2009), 427.

Algerian independence reinvigorated the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>123</sup> The regime was courted by Warsaw Pact countries as well as China, Egypt and the Soviet Union itself.

Communist services were also offered to Ben Bella's successor, Houari Boumédiène who overthrew Ben Bella in June 1965. He undertook a policy of formulating an industrial policy to modernise the country and enable it to survive. He also instituted the construction of a highly centralised state and the transformation of the FLN party into a powerless, parallel and "inert administrative apparatus". The state then exercised all executive, legislative and judicial power and nationalised the economy. The state became the "principal agent of industrialisation and development".<sup>124</sup> Algerian oil and gas were at the heart of the country's development plans. Simultaneously Algeria "aspired to export their blend of revolution and nationalism to other countries in Africa and the Arab world".<sup>125</sup> The Palestinian Movement was a "major focus and beneficiary of the Algerian policy of exporting revolution" and Algeria later adopted a "hard-line" policy to the Six Day War and Boumédiène remained committed to a Palestinian insurgency as being the only means to resolve the Arab-Israeli problem.<sup>126</sup> Slonim recognises that during the 1960s Algeria grew "even more extreme" than Egypt on "general antagonism to the West".<sup>127</sup> Moscow was an irreplaceable source of arms, expertise, and commerce with Algiers and this reflected Soviet involvement in Egypt. At the same time Algeria's relations with its Maghreb neighbours including Morocco and Libya would be "a cynical history of detente and dispute", both these regimes being monarchies and politically opposed to the Algerian model.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Stone, *The Agony of Algeria*, p. 229.

<sup>124</sup> M. Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 122.

<sup>125</sup> Byrne, 'Our Own Special Brand of Socialism', 428-429.

<sup>126</sup> Stone, *The Agony of Algeria*, p. 230.

<sup>127</sup> S. Slonim, 'Egypt, Algeria, and the Libyan Revolution', *The World Today*, (1970), 127.

<sup>128</sup> Stone, *The Agony of Algeria*, p. 232.

Libya and Britain's interests in the country were further threatened, as we have seen, by Egypt. Egyptian newspapers were widely available in Libya and Cairo Radio's "Voice of the Arabs" had "a large and impressionable audience". Libyan teachers, Libyans trained in Egypt and Egyptian "cultural influence" channelled "Nasserite, pan-Arab and anti-Western" ideas into the Kingdom, although there was widespread suspicion of Egyptian intentions given the diplomatic pressure and "plain subversion" Nasser instigated against his neighbour. By 1965 Cairo was considered to have significant political influence over Libya and this interest was focused on Libya's growing oil development.<sup>129</sup> Turning to British interests, London had been in a confrontation with Egypt for over a decade and it was believed that Nasser, backed financially and politically by the Soviet Union, posed a continued threat to British interests in Libya and the Middle East. Anglo-Egyptian relations had remained at best frosty since the 1956 Suez Crisis and had become strained over the civil war in the Yemen. Egyptian troops had been deployed in increasing numbers in support of the revolutionary regime in Sana'a, fighting Royalist forces supported by Saudi Arabia and Britain. British facilities in Libya, along with the US Wheelus base became the focus of increased anti-Western protests and there were repeated calls from the Libyan nationalist opposition and President Nasser of Egypt for the abrogation of the treaty and the removal of the facilities.

In early 1964 Nasser had secured a political rapprochement with his fellow Arab states following the Cairo Summit held in January of that year. Political differences between Egypt and other revolutionary Arab states like Syria as well as conservative monarchies in Jordan and Saudi Arabia were assuaged. At the summit it was agreed to carry out planning to address conflicts between Arab states and to address the issue of the diversion of water from the Jordan by Israel. The summit also established a joint military defence command under Egyptian leadership.<sup>130</sup> Riding high on an

---

<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Libya*, pp. 94, 96.

<sup>130</sup> M. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, Gamal 'Abd Al-Nasir and his Rivals 1958-1970* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 96-105.

improvement in relations, Nasser signalled out the deployments on 22 February 1964 when he declared that the foreign facilities in Libya were a danger to all Arabs and called for their liquidation. Nasser's speech and Libyan public demonstrations against Britain's military presence led to riots in Libya on the 8 and 9 March and on 16 March 1964 the Libyan Chamber of Deputies agreed in principle to the termination of the treaty and complete evacuation of all foreign troops.<sup>131</sup> To the opposition in Libya the military deployments represented not only Western colonial oppression but the "first line of defence against insurrection".<sup>132</sup>

The Conservative Government in London concluded that, in view of the important strategic interests at stake, the British could not acquiesce in any unilateral cancelling of the treaty and therefore would not agree to take part in negotiations directed to its termination. The Foreign Office (FO) considered that "we maintain our bases whether in Cyprus, Libya, Aden or Singapore because we believe that they play a vital part in preserving stability. They help to deter communist aggression against our allies in CENTO and SEATO and they enable us to honour our commitments".<sup>133</sup> London, whilst seeking to retain over-flying, staging and training rights, would accept withdrawal from the garrison presence at Benghazi and Tripoli. The approach was to persuade the Libyans to review the treaty instead of abrogating it and to secure Britain's defence obligation to Libya which guaranteed military facilities in Libya. The British were not obliged to maintain troops in Libya, but a deployment that facilitated a point of entry for troops would, in the view of the Chiefs of Staff, enable the defence plan for Libya to be carried out more efficiently. To keep the treaty and political relationship in being, the British considered they had to satisfy the Libyans of London's capacity to fulfil obligations to defend them. Planners advised that a minimum force at Tobruk and El Adem, to secure a point of entry for troops, would reassure the Libyans. The Foreign Office calculated that such a deployment would be less obtrusive than at

---

<sup>131</sup> R Sarrell to R A Butler, 30 March 1964, FO 371/178879

<sup>132</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 92.

<sup>133</sup> FO to Benghazi, 23 June 1964, FO 371/178880.

Benghazi, where troops were already deployed and which had once itself been the point of entry.<sup>134</sup>

The King was able to reassert his authority during 1964 and formal talks between the British and Libya led to an agreement to evacuate the Tripoli garrison by the end of 1965. The garrison at Benghazi was to be evacuated at an unspecified later date. Britain's military presence would comprise of an armoured car squadron stationed at El Adem with an infantry company at Tobruk.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, by the summer of 1964 Britain's political relationship and strategic stake in Libya had been secured , although following Labour's General Election victory in October 1964 these were to be reviewed, revised and ultimately abandoned before Labour were removed from power in 1970.

---

<sup>134</sup> Memorandum, Libyan Treaty, 16 December 1964, FO 371/178883.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2 The Anglo-Libyan Review 1964-1965

Upon taking office in October 1964 the Labour Government sought to maintain an extensive defence policy East of Suez and the Libyan facilities were considered important for that role. However, faced with an ailing economy, ministers sanctioned withdrawals from some of the facilities in order to save on overseas expenditure, in line with agreements made by the previous Conservative and Libyan Government. These withdrawals were confirmed as part of the Anglo-Libyan review in January 1965, despite King Idris' request that the British should remain, but a residual military presence was still important to London.

As we have seen Britain's military presence in Libya served to support wider strategic defence plans East of Suez, by providing staging and over-flying facilities to allies in SEATO and CENTO as well as in the Gulf. The military presence in Libya was part of a chain of deployments stretching from Gibraltar to Malta, Cyprus, Bahrain and Aden. They represented both a political and military commitment to the Arab conservative regime in Libya and signalled British and Western support for other such regimes. This demonstration of support contributed to wider Western security in the region. The Middle East had enormous strategic importance as it was a focal point of communication, a rich source of oil and a defence shield against Soviet aggrandisement into Africa. The region was also politically unstable, split between traditional, conservative and nationalist regimes, as well as by the on-going Arab-Israeli confrontation. Libya was considered the western extremity of the Middle East by British planners.<sup>136</sup>

Retaining the Libyan deployments enabled the Anglo-Libyan relationship to be maintained. They facilitated British political influence through practical working

---

<sup>136</sup> CC (65) 49, memorandum, The Middle East, 24 March 1965, CAB 129/120.

relations between the Libyan leadership and army, and British military and diplomatic representatives. King Idris, who remained politically powerful, was endeared to the British, not just as a result of mutual war-time experiences and the support the British had given him prior to the creation of the independent Libyan state, but also because he considered the defence agreement a security guarantee for himself and his regime, given the military and political threat from Egypt.

The military presence, enabling London to promote political influence and good relations, also secured preferential commercial treatment for the British, especially in arms sales. During this period Libyan oil revenues began to grow as the country exploited its rich reserves which had been discovered in the late 1950s. British oil companies, including British Petroleum, were instrumental in the development of Libyan oil.<sup>137</sup> Military missions, garrisons and staging sites were considered to be invaluable as points of contact to sell arms and services to the regime and, to a lesser degree, providing a military presence in defence of Britain's growing oil concerns. Policy makers considered the deployments instrumental in aiding Britain's material welfare and believed that their loss could in turn lead to a decline in political influence and associated British interests in Libya. Furthermore a military presence in Libya facilitated inexpensive and extensive training opportunities that lowered London's global defence bill.

From January 1965 the Labour Government was engaged in a review of the Anglo-Libyan relationship. This was partly a result of King Idris' appeal in late 1964 that a military presence remain in Libya, as well as part of a larger review initiated after the Libyan Government's withdrawal request earlier in that year. In January 1965 the Government agreed that the military presence was to be run down to a minimum necessary presence to defend Libya and for supporting strategic responsibilities. This involved a withdrawal from the Tripoli garrison and airport, a planned withdrawal from the Benghazi garrison and a limited presence at Tobruk and El Adem.

---

<sup>137</sup> J. Wright, *Libya a Modern History* (London, 1981), pp. 220-234.

Because both Britain and Libya had an interest in maintaining the military deployment, complete disengagement was not an option, not at least until the treaty expired in 1973. Meanwhile the facilities were a drain upon the Exchequer, both in terms of the stationing of troops as well as the payment of a subsidy to the regime. Alternative ways of both financing and fulfilling this treaty commitment were considered. These included replacing the subsidy with alternative “technical” assistance, which was only partly successful, as the British were aware that they already gained considerable advantages through the treaty and were not willing to force a formal reinterpretation. Officials believed a written agreement on “technical” assistance would undermine the relationship. The second idea, of requesting the Libyans to pay for the deployments, was deemed inappropriate as no Arab country would be likely to accede to such a request.

## 2.1 Libyan Defence and Political Relations

In the spring of 1964 British facilities in Libya consisted of RAF Idris at Tripoli Airport and the Tripoli garrison, both in Tripolitania. In addition the British maintained the Benghazi garrison and the staging facilities at El Adem, which included a small military presence at Tobruk in Cyrenaica. Finally there were the military missions. In February 1964 President Nasser of Egypt had criticised the presence of British forces in Libya. To assuage popular Libyan protest against the British presence, the Libyan Government demanded the termination of the 1953 treaty and liquidation of the remaining facilities. The Conservative Government at the time were eager not to terminate the treaty and lose “vital staging and overflying facilities” and sidestepped the issue by agreeing to a review of the treaty.<sup>138</sup> Subsequently the British agreed to withdraw from RAF Tripoli and the Tripoli garrison. A withdrawal from Benghazi at some unspecified time in the future was additionally sanctioned.

By the end of 1964, King Idris had reasserted his power in Libya and was eager for the British to reconsider the planned withdrawal from Tripoli and Benghazi given the political and possibly military threat to his regime from Algeria and Egypt. In January the following year the Labour Government were faced with making a decision on either to maintain present facilities in Libya or continue to pursue the withdrawal as negotiated under the Conservative Government. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOPC), the senior Cabinet committee on defence and foreign policy, reached general agreement on 3 February 1965 with proposals of the Official Committee of the DOPC (DOPC (O)). This sub-committee of senior officials on defence and foreign policy had made recommendations on the future deployments of British troops in Libya in light of the Anglo-Libyan Review.<sup>139</sup> These proposals

---

<sup>138</sup> OPD (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

<sup>139</sup> OPD (65) 7 mtg, 3 February 1965, CAB 148/18.

recognised that remaining in Cyrenaica would satisfy the King's request that the British remain, which had been based upon his own and his government's fear of Nasser. A continued limited deployment would maintain faith with the regime. The King had implied that he would like the British to remain in Benghazi indefinitely, possibly because this garrison lay nearest to the Egyptian border. Idris was suspicious and anxious about Cairo's intentions and these concerns grew as oil production expanded in this area of the country. Furthermore, a Cyrenaican deployment lay within Idris' ancestral and tribal lands and he considered a military presence contributed to internal stability. During negotiations in August 1964 the Libyans had agreed in principle to the withdrawal from Benghazi and the stationing of an armoured car squadron at El Adem at some point in 1967. The King was to be urged to comply with this plan by the Ambassador, with the threat that the longer British forces remained in Benghazi, the less likely an estimated £500,000 building programme would be granted for El Adem to accommodate any new deployment, given that the treaty had only eight years to run. The Ambassador was to explain that if British forces remained at Benghazi but were subsequently asked to withdraw, then the military units would have to be withdrawn in their entirety, as there would be no suitable facilities to move to and such a situation would diminish British capabilities to fulfil the defence element of the treaty. The DOPC also agreed that there was no military value in maintaining the Tripoli garrison because the obligation to defend Libya could be insured by maintaining a minimum presence in the eastern territory of Cyrenaica rather than in western Tripolitania. Troops from Tripoli would be withdrawn during 1966. To assuage the King, should he be unwilling to accept British proposals, an offer of an unaccompanied infantry company at Tripoli on a rotational basis was to be made, but only as a last resort. The RAF presence at Idris airport was to be run down.<sup>140</sup>

In formulating these proposals on Libya facilities, the Foreign Office had considered the rising costs of maintaining overseas facilities as well as the growing

---

<sup>140</sup> OPD (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

concern that maintaining troops in Libya carried unnecessary political risks. These risks were anti-Western opposition in Libya and throughout the Arab world to British deployments and interests, which could enflame “nationalist feeling”.<sup>141</sup> The DOPC were advised that the positioning of British forces in a less conspicuous place, namely El Adem, would attract less criticism.<sup>142</sup> The Foreign Office believed that the remaining facilities would reassure the King and maintain his support whilst making a “contribution ...to the maintenance of internal stability”. By meeting, to some extent, the King’s wishes in Cyrenaica, the Foreign Office stated that “we shall be in a stronger position to reduce our financial expenditure on Libya and to make use of the... training facilities in Tripolitania”. A continued presence also gave the British “additional cards in any subsequent negotiations”.<sup>143</sup>

In summation, the 1965 planned deployments for the defence of Libya was to be that which had been agreed in July 1964 by the Chiefs of Staff and would enable the British to meet the 1953 treaty defence requirement. The British would withdraw from the Tripoli in 1966 and remove their presence from Tripoli airport. The Benghazi garrison would close at some unspecified point in the near future. Instead the British presence would now consist of an infantry company at Tobruk and a stockpiled squadron at El Adem, reinforced by an armoured car squadron, transferred from Benghazi following its closure. This arrangement was considered the minimum force necessary to maintain a point of entry, for rapid reinforcement, by an infantry battalion from Malta, as well as providing an effective air defence facility. Air defence would come from Akrotiri in Cyprus and an armoured reconnaissance regiment in Cyprus would also be available.<sup>144</sup> The original point of entry had been Benghazi on the Cyrenaican coast, three hundred miles to the west of El Adem. The new deployments

---

<sup>141</sup> Draft, Annex B to OPD paper on Libya, January 1965, FO 371/184228.

<sup>142</sup> OPD (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

<sup>143</sup> Draft OPD paper, Defence facilities in Libya, 6 January 1965, FO 371/184228.

<sup>144</sup> COS 138/64, referenced in draft, future facilities of the British army in Cyrenaica, 5 July 1966, FO 371/90492.

did not affect the continued use of the British military missions. In accordance with the DOPC decision, British Ambassador Roderick Sarrell met King Idris on 22 February 1965 and explained British plans for the facilities, which Idris accepted. Whilst reportedly sad, Idris contented himself with the thought that the Americans would remain at the Wheelus air base near Tripoli and that at the very least the British would continue to maintain a presence in his homeland, Cyrenaica.<sup>145</sup>

As we have seen, when considering the British presence in Libya officials in London took account of King Idris' position on the military deployments and the likely repercussions for the Anglo-Libyan political relationship. The deployments symbolised a British political commitment to the monarchy. King Idris considered they provided insurance not only against a military attack from Egypt but a degree of domestic stability and represented a personal obligation on his behalf to the British.<sup>146</sup> Maintaining a good political relationship also enabled the British to preserve a military presence that serviced the defence plans and reinforced British influence in the country. However the annual subsidy that London paid to Libya for these facilities was a drain on the Exchequer and during 1965 the British attempted to end the payments as part of the Anglo-Libyan Review.

The Foreign Office regarded Idris as the "sheet anchor of relations with Libya and the facilities we enjoy" and that was why a compromise solution over the evacuation of Tripoli had been mooted should the King have refused.<sup>147</sup> Relations between London and the King remained strong. Former Head of Chancery, Sir Ivor Lucas claims that, "up till that time, we'd had quite a special relationship with the Libyans, based on our

---

<sup>145</sup> R S Scrivener, Head of North and East African Department (NEAD) to FO, 2 March 1965, FO371/184229, R Sarrell to M Stewart, report, 14 April 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>146</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.99.

<sup>147</sup> Draft, Annex B to DOPO paper on Libya, January 1965, FO 371/184228.

friendship with, and service to, King Idris".<sup>148</sup> This was of special importance because it was the King who held considerable power and influence in Libya as well as over any elected government. British plans existed for the evacuation of the Royal Family in the event of a revolution and until the early 1960s the British had been prepared to intervene in domestic confrontations, although they were not treaty bound to do so. Despite this, the relationship, based on Idris' role, appeared not likely to last for too much longer. In 1964 the King was already 74 years old and physically fragile, although "not nearly as old and frail as people thought". The opposition, composed of student groups and heavily proscribed trade union members believed he "had died some years before but, in order to maintain their hold on Libya, the British had made a wax effigy which they stuck in the back of the Rolls" and drove around Tripoli at regular intervals.<sup>149</sup> The King's position was fairly secure given that Libyan opposition had been largely crushed by the early 1960s through the prohibition of political parties and consolidation of power within the hands of Idris and his immediate family and favoured ministers.<sup>150</sup> Despite this British planners were concerned by the implications for British interests if Idris should die. The King had no immediate family heir and it fell to Sayid Hasan ar-Rida al-Mahdi as-Senussi, his nephew, the Crown Prince, to succeed to the throne in the event of Idris' death. But the Crown Prince appeared unpopular, lacking in ability and unsuitable for the position. A draft Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) report in the summer of 1965 concluded that the King was still "firmly in control of affairs in Libya" and internal stability was secured by his presence. However, the "prospects for an immediate succession are at present slightly better

---

<sup>148</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Interview with The Hon. Ivor Thomas Mark Lucas, 25 January 2005, conducted by Malcolm McBain. Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Lucas.pdf> [22 January 2010], 17.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>150</sup> G. Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke/New York, 1993), p. 168.

than evens". By 1967 the King still appeared to look "healthily decrepit" as one journalist observed.<sup>151</sup>

As long as the King remained on the throne, the British continued to deal personally with him on political and diplomatic matters. In 1964 and 1965 he was approached over the future of the facilities as well as the outstanding political issue of the subsidy. The military deployments were only possible because the British Government paid a subsidy under article three of the Anglo-Libyan treaty. From 1953 to 1959 the total subsidy was £3.75 million per annum, and from 1958 to 1963 £3.25 million. From 1963 to 1965 it had continued at this rate because a tenth anniversary review in 1963 had been postponed by Libyan request.<sup>152</sup> The subsidy issue had been used by the Conservative Government to side-step the 1964 liquidation request, by steering the Libyans to review the treaty and hence the subsidy, rather than acquiesce to a full withdrawal.<sup>153</sup>

By 1965 Britain's economic position had deteriorated and the Libyan subsidy was a suitable target for cuts, given that Tripoli had grown rich through oil royalties and exploration. The Foreign Office gave consideration to alternative methods of payment whilst continuing to maintain and enjoy the benefits of the facilities. One option considered was technical and development aid, although the Foreign Office legal advisor suggested these could not be substituted within the terms of the treaty. Alternatively a grant of a sum tied to technical assistance was considered acceptable.<sup>154</sup> The King had agreed with the British Ambassador, Roderick Sarrell in

---

<sup>151</sup> Joint Intelligence Committee, JIC, Draft report, The succession in Libya and its implications for the stationing of British troops, July 1965, FO 371/184231. Wright, *Libya*, p.115.

<sup>152</sup> Draft, Annex B to DOPO paper on Libya, January 1965, FO 371/184228.

<sup>153</sup> OPD (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, Note by Chairman of the Defence and Oversea Policy (Official) Committee, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

December 1964 that the provision of experts would be a more appropriate way of assisting Libya than financial assistance and the subsidy had been withdrawn from the Libyan budget for 1965. A formally agreed replacement for the subsidy though had not been agreed upon with the King or in Whitehall.<sup>155</sup>

Meanwhile Treasury officials continued to urge the “need to greatly reduce our commitments to Libya”.<sup>156</sup> The Treasury observed that the Foreign Office had previously advised that the “insurance premium” of the subsidy had not been a “stable guarantee” of British interests in Libya. To illustrate this point, Treasury officials emphasised that the Sudanese had restricted over-flying of their country, which neutralised the value of the Libyan staging post at El Adem.<sup>157</sup> In reply the DOPC was advised by the Foreign Office that the Sudanese action was not as damaging as the Treasury considered, as in time the Sudanese were expected to lift the ban. The Foreign Office claimed that any attempt to emphatically reinterpret the subsidy obligation could affect the existing political relationship and so jeopardise London’s strategic position.<sup>158</sup> To complicate matters further, in January 1965 the Libyan Government had pointed out that if the British used facilities they should be prepared to pay for them. As a result, the Foreign Office accepted that London might, as some point, have to accept continuation of budgetary aid.<sup>159</sup>

At DOPC on 3 February 1965 it was concluded that it would be impracticable, without further negotiation, to make a firm commitment about the level of technical assistance that could be usefully attained as a replacement for the subsidy. The

---

<sup>155</sup> Draft, Annex B to DOPO paper on Libya, January 1965, FO 371/184228.

<sup>156</sup> R Sharp, Assistant Secretary, Finance and Development, memorandum, 26 January 1965, Treasury, T 317/800, National Archives, London.

<sup>157</sup> P S Milner-Barry, Assistant Secretary, Finance and Development, memorandum, Anglo Libyan Review, 19 January 1965, T 317/800.

<sup>158</sup> OPD (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

<sup>159</sup> Draft, Annex B to DOPO paper on Libya, January 1965, FO 371/184228.

British Ambassador was to inform the King that London wished to terminate the subsidy and replace it with training or technical assistance and possibly a small sum of money. The Ministry for Overseas Development had calculated technical assistance to be set at a figure of £100,000 a year, but subsequently developed little in the way of a programme, except for the provision of teachers and university lecturers.<sup>160</sup> British Ambassador Sarrell urged the introduction of a small technical assistance programme, which could be developed when the Libyans requested, rather than attempting to draw up an elaborate plan of technical aid when the Libyans were “so unsettled about their economic plans”. By September 1965 a replacement for the subsidy had not been formulated. The Foreign Office considered that because the Anglo-Libyan Review was essentially an oral matter with the King, it was “unwise to pin them (the Libyans) down” and “maybe use agreed minute but not formal exchange of letters”. An alternative approach to reducing costs was to get the Libyans to pay for an element of the facilities. The Foreign Office considered it was “tactfully inappropriate to force the Libyans to pay for future services if they are needed after 1966/1967, as all facilities were presently taken at greatly reduced cost”. The British were already deriving “the very valuable fringe benefits of our military presence in Libyan, particularly in the sale of substantial quantities of arms and civil aircraft”.<sup>161</sup>

Meanwhile the political implications of Britain’s projected deployment plans caused Ambassador Sarrell some concern. The proposals involved a sole presence at Tobruk and El Adem. Sarrell believed that withdrawal from the Benghazi garrison would undermine the relationship with the King, who was greatly concerned by the threat from Egypt on the eastern border with Cyrenaica.<sup>162</sup> The February 1965 decision had been to withdraw from Benghazi at the end of 1967, but along with the threat from Cairo, circumstances in Libya had now changed. Firstly, the King’s position had

---

<sup>160</sup> M Stewart to R Sarrell, 4 February 1965, FO 371/184228.

<sup>161</sup> Draft, Libya: Present position of the Treaty Review, September 1965, FO 371/184232.

<sup>162</sup> R Sarrell to R Scrivener, 25 June 1965, FO 371/184231.

steadily grown in strength and it was considered important to remain on good terms with Idris, even if that entailed maintaining costly facilities. Secondly the British had begun to develop interests in the exploitation of Libyan oil and trade opportunities were growing as a result of Libya's rising oil revenue. Thirdly, the planned move to El Adem was becoming more expensive as land and labour prices were soaring in that area. The increase in land costs led the Chiefs of Staff to instruct the army and air force to review the plan for future facilities later in 1965.<sup>163</sup> Finally, the Libyan military were opposed to a move to El Adem, Ambassador Sarrell having reported in March 1965 that they considered it "as being unsound militarily".<sup>164</sup>

Sarrell favoured the retention of the Benghazi garrison, even if only of squadron strength, in addition to an infantry company in Tobruk. He believed the Benghazi garrison was the best deployment as the King stressed its function in maintaining stability in the city and throughout Cyrenaica. Sarrell considered it acted as a deterrent "not only to the local hot heads, but also to the Egyptians".<sup>165</sup> Sarrell's interpretation of the Benghazi garrison as a deterrent to Libyan and Egyptian opposition was in line with the Foreign Office's interpretation of the role of the facilities. This role was based on a bluff because the British sold the Egyptians the idea that British forces would intervene in an internal issue in Libya, possibly a coup or even a revolution, although as we have seen, this was highly unlikely by the mid 1960s.<sup>166</sup>

The bluff had been nurtured by the handing over of a draft of Britain's Libyan intervention plan, "Operation Rufford", dating from the early 1960s, to Egyptian and

---

<sup>163</sup> Draft, Future deployment of the British army in Cyrenaica, 5 July 1966, FO 371/190492. In March 1966 the Chiefs of Staff had decided to suspend the study altogether until the UK's 1966 Defence Review was decided.

<sup>164</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British Troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>165</sup> Vice-Chief General Staff note to Chief General Staff, 5 May 1965, FO 371/184230.

<sup>166</sup> Report, British policy towards Libya, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

Iraqi military attachés by Staff Sergeant Allen in 1965. Operation “Rufford” was withdrawn by the MOD in December 1964. Allen’s “Rufford” documents had specifically spelt out internal security action in Libya and this led the Egyptians to believe the British were sanctioned to intervene in any internal issue.<sup>167</sup> A withdrawal from Benghazi would undermine the bluff, which was considered as an “important element in Nasser’s calculations” , deterring Egypt from involving themselves too closely with anti-Idris opposition.<sup>168</sup> Cairo was so taken with the revelations in Allen’s documents, which also included plans for Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria that at the end of May 1965 the Egyptian paper *Al Ahrām* published all the documents outlining British strategy in the Middle East.<sup>169</sup>

Ambassador Sarrell considered that the political disadvantages of retaining troops in the capital of Cyrenaica had actually been overplayed and the Cyrenaicans were happy with the British presence.<sup>170</sup> In June 1965 he emphasised the political basis for stationing troops in Benghazi. He believed that no mob of students would attack the garrison at Benghazi (which was actually what happened in the summer of 1967) and moving to El Adem would encourage a new irritant as it was not entirely isolated from the population as the Foreign Office thought. Sarrell added that moving from Benghazi would unnerve the Libyan Government, concerned as they were with the threat from Egypt. Giving up Benghazi would also be one less card to play for the British, should further requests be made for abandoning facilities.<sup>171</sup> The Foreign Office duly noted Sarrell’s and local commanders’ support for maintaining Benghazi as the “point of entry” for British troops.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> Sergeant Allen Spy Case, FO 371/183963.

<sup>168</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British Troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>169</sup> Sergeant Allen Spy Case, FO 371/183963.

<sup>170</sup> VCGS note to CGS, 5 May 1965, FO 371/184230.

<sup>171</sup> R Sarrell to R Scrivener, 25 June 1965, FO 371/184231.

<sup>172</sup> Draft, Libya Present position of the Treaty Review, 30 September 1965, FO 371/184232.

As we have seen, earlier in 1965 the Foreign Office had envisaged that by the end of March 1966 one infantry battalion would be withdrawn from Tripoli, which as a military deployment would be wound down. The Benghazi garrison, consisting of one armoured regiment and one infantry company would be withdrawn from Libya and an armoured car squadron would go to El Adem around the end of 1967. Whilst the Ambassador pressed for a Benghazi presence the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Military Headquarters Malta and Libya and Headquarters Middle East carried out an examination during the summer of 1965 on the manpower and costs involved in three possible deployment options, each of which involved maintaining an infantry company at Tobruk and the El Adem staging post facilities. Course A would amount to one unaccompanied armoured squadron at El Adem housed and administrated on a shoestring budget. Course B would retain one unaccompanied armoured car squadron at Benghazi, with minimum essential overheads and finally course C would be composed of an accompanied armoured reconnaissance regiment (less one squadron in Cyprus) at Benghazi, which was the present deployment. Feeling in the Ministry of Defence was that course A was the most likely deployment plan although it involved no presence at Benghazi.

Therefore by the autumn of 1965 the British had decided to withdraw from Tripoli and Benghazi although the Ambassador strongly urged a retention of a military presence in Benghazi. The issue of how to formally end the Anglo-Libyan review in terms of a suitable legal or financial resolution to the question of the subsidy remained unanswered. However the political value of keeping some deployments grew, especially as the economic interests tied up with the relationship emerged as a significant issue in policy decisions.<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2.2 Economic Interests

The deployments in Libya enabled the British to not only defend the country, but to court political favour and garner valuable trade opportunities. Britain's economic difficulties in the mid-1960s made the relationship with the Libyan regime more important than ever. The Labour Government's struggle with the balance of trade deficit meant that the promotion and sale of goods overseas was an economic priority. The Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence and in turn the Labour Government were anxious to maintain the relationship and the increasing trade benefits which flowed from it.

Libya during the 1960s was an emerging trade market, a result of the rapid development of an oil industry which brought in huge amounts of revenue. This had been a complete reversal in fortunes for the young country because from independence to the first exports of oil in the early 1960s the country had been tremendously poor.<sup>174</sup> Oil exploration had begun in 1957 when a dozen major American, British and multinational oil companies like Esso and BP and independents such as Continental, Oasis and Bunker Hunt had been awarded about 60 concessions. In 1959 oil was discovered by Esso at the Zeltan field, Sirtica in Cyrenaica. Libya blossomed rapidly into one of the world's leading petroleum producers as American and British oil companies rushed in to take advantage of the bonanza profits. From 1960 the Libyan state began to experience rapid economic growth.

British concerns, pioneered by BP, were initially unsuccessful but in early 1963 the BP exploited Sarir field was shown to be the largest in Africa and twice the size of the

---

<sup>174</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p. 182.

greatest in the US, the East Texas. The field was situated 500 km from the coast where the site for a new oil terminal was chosen at Marsa al-Haiga, on the deep natural harbour opposite Tobruk.<sup>175</sup> The presence of the British military facility may have played a part in deciding to site the terminal there, along with the deep water access available on the coast. Pipeline exports began in 1967.

In 1965 the Libyan Government offered “new” oil concessions. These concessions consisted of territory handed back after 5 years, under a clause in the 1955 Petroleum Law, which required concession holders to relinquish a quarter of their holdings five years after its award, with further relinquishments after 8 and 10 years. In 1966 many awards went to little known foreign companies vying for coveted concessions, previously held by larger companies. Some of these concessions went to Occidental Petroleum, led by Armand Hammer, who exploited the oil fields in a “brilliantly successful Libyan operation”.<sup>176</sup>

From limited oil exports in 1960, by late 1963 Libya had 437 producing wells and this made up 98.7 percent of the country’s exports.<sup>177</sup> By 1967 Libya was producing 6.8 percent of global oil production, as extraction by up to 40 US and European companies developed swiftly. Libya was fortunate to have had a degree of control over this development, not witnessed in many other oil producing Arab states. Wright considers that Libya’s 1955 Petroleum Law enabled the country to escape the dominance of any one or group of oil companies and was designed to “encourage diversity and competition among concessionaires”.<sup>178</sup> Despite this, the major companies did succeed in obtaining a generous contract through the law. As Wright explained:

---

<sup>175</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.225.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>177</sup> D. Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence* (New York, 1998), p. 50.

<sup>178</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.221.

“The 1955 law made profits liable to a 50% tax –after deduction of operating costs- with a 12.5 % royalty treated as a partial advance towards tax. But the law was unusually generous, both allowing allowances for deductions against tax and in linking the income of concessionaries to the realized “posted price” as was the common practice in the Middle East”.<sup>179</sup>

The oil boom saw Libyan Government revenue leap from \$3 million in 1961 to \$1,175 million in 1969.<sup>180</sup> Libya’s oil also had advantages over other oil producers in the Arab world: It was bountiful and of high quality, the oil was easily marketed as it was close to Europe, west of Suez and therefore also cheaper to transport than from other Arab countries. In 1962 Libya joined OPEC and in 1966 accepted an OPEC resolution outlining new pricing arrangements amongst members. As Wright explains, this action undermined the independent companies’ strong position. From then on the Libyan Government had the power to “modify the terms of an oil concession in its favour “. <sup>181</sup> Oil revenues enabled the country’s economy to grow in excess of 20% per annum.<sup>182</sup>

With oil revenue flowing into the country the Libyan Government aimed to develop the economy. A Ministry of Industry was established in 1961 to develop private and state industries. Through economic development it was hoped that Libyan dependence on foreign imports would be reduced, although the domestic market was small and skilled labour was in short supply. Oil revenue meant Libya was no longer reliant on sterling and dollar subsidies and in 1963 the government launched its first

---

<sup>179</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 221. Posted prices were the price at which a given quantity of crude oil was offered for sale at a given place. Companies normally calculated profits to be shared with host government on posted prices which determined company tax payments and government revenues.

<sup>180</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.227.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111, 231.

<sup>182</sup> Vandewalle, *Libya Since Independence*, p. 50.

Five Year Plan with a budget of £170 million. From the budget £30 million was allocated to forestry and agriculture to revitalize that ailing sector of the economy and a considerable amount spent on public works. Expansion of Libyan industry was largely unsuccessful and by the late 1960s the economy was still reliant on oil revenues.<sup>183</sup>

Oil prospecting, production and the resultant huge revenues generated not only great wealth but new political and social aspirations in Libya. Whilst expectations for a better life grew amongst the population, so did corruption and patronage as the ruling elites, including members of the Senussi order and privileged business communities exploited opportunities for wealth creation.<sup>184</sup> Oil development created a layer of speculators, a new urban middle class and drew in tens of thousands of foreign, mainly Egyptian workers. The failure of the regime to manage this rapid social and economic change and to distribute wealth exposed them further as incompetent and corrupt. In April 1963 the British Ambassador Andrew Stewart warned that developments in Libya on the political level had implications for the British military position which were “far from comforting”.<sup>185</sup> As a result, Arab Nationalist rhetoric and propaganda had great appeal to students, workers and disaffected elements of Libya’s armed forces whose aspirations were frustrated.

Libya’s economic growth and increasing wealth drew great interest in Whitehall. From 1964 the opportunities for securing and increasing trade with the Kingdom were stressed in policy documents. The military facilities were seen as important elements in maintaining and developing trade, particularly in arms. Whilst abandoning the military presence would enable cost cutting in the defence budget, the existence of British facilities allowed London to promote arms sales and provide training and after sales services as outlined in the Agreement on Military Facilities. The maintenance of

---

<sup>183</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle For Survival*, p. 183.

<sup>184</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.89.

<sup>185</sup> Report, British policy towards Libya 1963, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

a British military presence also reassured the King and ensured the British had preferential treatment in arms sales. The Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence stressed the link between Britain's relationship with Libya, based upon maintaining facilities, and the trade benefits enjoyed. Any undermining of the relationship would threaten these interests.

In September 1965 the Foreign Office noted "the very valuable fringe benefits" from the military presence in Libya, "particular in the sale of substantial quantities of arms" and projected sales of civil aircraft.<sup>186</sup> Arms sales were promoted through the military missions and joint training operations of the British and Libyan military. British arms exports to Libya were in excess of £9.2 million, in addition to other exports totalling £13 million for the first 6 months of 1966.<sup>187</sup> The possible damage to British trade was considered when policy on the facilities was formulated. As we have seen, in September 1965, as part of the Anglo-Libyan Review, it was considered inappropriate to get the Libyans to pay for the facilities as the British already gained valuable trading fringe benefits from them.

Trade between Libya and Britain continued to grow significantly during the 1960s. In 1960 visible trade with Libya accounted for £12.7 million in exports from Britain and £0.7 million in imports from Libya, giving a balance in Britain's favour of £12 million. In 1963, as Libyan oil development and exports grew, British exports to Libya accounted for £14.4 million but Libyan imports stood at £38.3 million. By 1965 the figures had grown to £22 million in exports to the country and £71.6 million in imports giving an imbalance of £49.4 million in Libya's favour.<sup>188</sup> However the British did not have a monopoly on trade with Libya. The USA, France and Italy became involved in oil

---

<sup>186</sup> Memorandum, Libya, August 1966, FO 371/190493.

<sup>187</sup> Draft paper, FO and Ministry of Defence, MOD, Cost of British forces in Libya, October 1966, FO 371/190494.

<sup>188</sup> F. Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-1987* (London, 1989), p. 180.

exploration and production, whilst Italy and France also became engaged in the trade in arms, services and consumer goods. There was also an emerging trading threat from the Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact countries, and Yugoslavia. Moscow already had a significant trade and advisor presence in Egypt and Algeria and Moscow's interest in Libya portended a potential economic thrust into the Kingdom as well as a strategic threat in the Mediterranean, given the increasing reliance of Europe on Libyan oil.<sup>189</sup>

---

<sup>189</sup> W. Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East, The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1958-1968* (London, 1972), pp. 165, 167, 173-191.

## 2.3 Strategic Concerns

The Libyan military facilities enabled Britain to maintain a productive political and economic relationship with the Idris regime, as well provide an effective defence plan for Libya. The primary strategic purpose of the facilities was to enable Britain to service defence concerns beyond Europe. These interests constituted a collection of commitments and treaties linking Britain's foreign and defence policy East of Suez, spanning out into the Middle East, South Asia and South East Asia.<sup>190</sup> As Young has pointed out, the term East of Suez was "something of a misnomer" for East of Suez signified a world role for Britain that incorporated facilities closer than those situated between Aden and Singapore. These "were important staging posts to the Middle East and Far East in the Mediterranean with facilities in Cyprus, Libya, Malta and Gibraltar".<sup>191</sup>

These military deployments were of strategic value because they allowed the British to protect Arab independence and Western oil concerns as well as service the East of Suez strategy through the "east about" air route to the Far East. Labour's defence and foreign policy from 1964 envisaged maintaining the East of Suez defence strategy and the Libyan facilities remained valuable to that strategy.<sup>192</sup> Specifically the Libyan deployments enabled Britain to service defence commitments to allies in

---

<sup>190</sup> C. Staerck and G. Staerck, 'The Realities Behind Britain's Global Defence Strategy', in W. Kaiser and G. Staerck (eds.), *British Foreign Policy 1955-1964, Contracting Options* (Basingstoke/New York, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>191</sup> J.W.Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International policy* (Manchester, 2003), p. 100.

<sup>192</sup> C. Staerck and G. Staerck, 'The Realities Behind Britain's Global Defence Strategy', p. 45.

CENTO and SEATO.<sup>193</sup> In 1964 Harold Wilson was happy to speak of 1000 men East of Suez being preferable to 1000 men in Germany, so emphasising Britain's global defence priorities.<sup>194</sup>

Britain's defence strategy was already under immense strain by 1964. This was a result of the financial commitment to maintaining defence forces overseas, which drained the exchequer and undermined the balance of payments and placed pressure on an already fragile economy. In 1962 defence reviews identified a loosening of the dependence on overseas facilities with a move to mobile forces in the Defence White Paper of that year. However, Britain's defence policy remained reliant on access to bases around the world despite the costs involved. Ultimately the "dichotomy between (British) defence aims and commitments and insufficient growth in the economy to finance them" came to dominate the foreign and defence policy considerations of the Labour Government. This would lead to the questioning of the rationale behind maintaining facilities.<sup>195</sup>

Whilst maintaining bases overseas was a costly policy, the role of such military facilities actually grew in importance. During the 1960s, the world's political centre moved from NATO and the West to the Third World and the Middle East. Britain's defence obligations seemed to require a commitment to Western as well as British security East of Suez. These deployments played a role in sharing the global defence burden with the US; a burden which increased further as Britain was drawn into the Malaysian-Indonesian Crisis and the US became embroiled in Vietnam. Saki Dockrill notes that the US and Britain looked to each other for support of their mutual global defence interests. Following the Wilson-Johnson 1964 Summit the US endorsed

---

<sup>193</sup> FO to Benghazi, 23 June 1964, FO 371/178880.

<sup>194</sup> J. C. Garnet, 'British Strategic Thought', in J. Bayliss (ed.), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London, 1977), p.169.

<sup>195</sup> C. Staerck and G. Staerck, 'The Realities Behind Britain's Global Defence Strategy', pp. 51, 52.

Britain's continued world global role, and Wilson restated the UK's commitment to global responsibilities and confirmed the Anglo-American partnership.<sup>196</sup> Bartlett even goes as far to claim that "British forces .....help(ed) to secure protection for the United States".<sup>197</sup>

British policy makers perceived the Libyan facilities to have continued value to strategic priorities. In March 1964 when Idris' government requested the closure of all foreign bases, strategic priorities meant that the British negotiated a limited withdrawal and the continuation of the treaty and the maintenance of those facilities. In February 1965, under the Labour Government, the value of the facilities to wider defence strategy influenced the British position regarding the Anglo-Libyan treaty review. When the Anglo-Libyan review reached DOPC on 3 February 1965 the Committee were reminded of the continued strategic role of the facilities and that the call for the termination of the treaty in 1964 and liquidation of the "bases" had threatened Britain's "vital staging and overflying facilities". There was now a "need to preserve our overflying and staging rights in Libya" although this ignored the restrictions imposed on overflying in Sudan enforced by the regime that had come to power during the October revolution of 1964. The "southern" route for British military aircraft to the Middle East and Far East through Libya, Sudan and Aden was considered particularly important given the uncertainty of the "northern" route to East of Suez through Cyprus and Turkey, which was reliant on over flight permission from Nicosia and Ankara.<sup>198</sup> D S Laskey, Under Secretary in the Cabinet Office, believed that the Sudanese government would change their policy and indeed the bases were considered to be an insurance policy against the "uncertainty about our continued presence in Malta and Cyprus" if not more important than those Mediterranean facilities. Laskey did accept it

---

<sup>196</sup> S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), pp. 74, 115.

<sup>197</sup> C.J. Bartlett, 'The military instrument in British foreign policy', in J. Bayliss (ed.), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London, 1977), p. 35.

<sup>198</sup> OPD (O) (65) 18, Anglo-Libyan Treaty Review, 25 January 1965, CAB 148/19.

as “unrealistic to suppose that we could retain bases in Libya for an extended period”.<sup>199</sup>

Burke Trend, the Cabinet Secretary, stressed to Prime Minister Wilson the strategic implications of British facilities in Libya in a briefing note prior to the DOPC meeting on the 3 February. British proposals represented a “compromise between the King’s renewed desire that we should maintain a substantial military presence in Libya and our own desire to do no more than is necessary to ensure that overflying and staging rights are preserved as an insurance .....against an interruption of the northern route”. Trend acknowledged doubts over relying upon the Sudan route and he considered the proposals were a compromise and “not logical or tidy”. Nevertheless Trend considered it “represented the right course” and would also enable the British to maintain defence commitment to Libya.<sup>200</sup> Whitehall’s emphasis upon the strategic value of the facilities was further illustrated in the political debate over replacing the subsidy with technical assistance later in 1965. The British Ambassador was instructed by the Foreign Secretary to drop the issue of replacing the subsidy if the strategic concerns of the staging and over-flying rights were jeopardised during the negotiations.<sup>201</sup>

Whilst Whitehall perceived that the Libyan facilities played a significant defence role in British global strategy, adequate fulfilment of this role was, in reality, greatly circumscribed. Firstly, the facilities could not serve any anti-Nasserite purpose and could not be used against another Arab nation. This was because under the terms of article four of the treaty no use could be made of the facilities that contradicted Libyan commitments to other Arab states. Consequently Libya’s commitment to the Arab

---

<sup>199</sup> D S Laskey, Cabinet Office to B Trend, Anglo Libyan Review, 19 January 1965, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>200</sup> B Trend to H Wilson, Anglo Libyan Review, 2 February 1965, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>201</sup> M Stewart to R Sarrell, Anglo Libyan Treaty Review, 4 February 1965, FO 371/184228.

League trimmed her obligation to Britain. Secondly, the facilities could be effectively isolated and neutralised by anti-Western demonstrations, as seen during the Suez crisis and the 1964 withdrawal request. The bases were considered by Arabs to be symbols of Western hegemony and interference in the Arab world and they were likely to be exploited by Nasserite propaganda as such. Therefore it was debatable what value they served in maintaining peace and stability specifically in the Middle East. Burke Trend stated that this value was “a matter of judgement”.<sup>202</sup> Finally, as we have seen, if in the worst case the Sudanese were not to rescind their withdrawal of overflying permission for the British, then the facilities would lose their global strategic role. A report for the DOPC in November 1965 recognised and emphasised that “forces stationed in Libya are small and the facilities of little external use to us now that our over flying rights are no longer useable, because of the present attitude of the Sudanese government”.<sup>203</sup> Wider policy changes in strategic policy initiated by the Labour Government would further undermine the strategic role of the Libyan facilities.

---

<sup>202</sup> B Trend to H Wilson, 12 November 1965, CAB 130/216.

<sup>203</sup> OPD (O) (65), Defence report, 8 November 1965, CAB 130/213.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In the first year of the Labour Government the Anglo-Libyan political relationship remained intact. The Anglo-Libyan Review in 1965 illustrated that the British were committed to good relations with the Idris regime and the maintenance of the military facilities, but at a minimum level, enabling the implementation of the defence plan whilst economising on expenditure. The Foreign Office had urged and the Cabinet accepted the retention of a limited, but adequate presence in Libya. The decision had been rationalised on the basis of three considerations.

Firstly, the facilities had a continued strategic value to East of Suez commitments. The Anglo-Libyan relationship, secured through a military presence, enabled the British to maintain their own and the West's strategic interests East of Suez. This was accepted in the January review. Secondly, the political implications of maintaining the King's trust and support were also factored into the decision, for without the King's political support Britain's deployments could be lost altogether. British policy continued to be amenable to Idris and aimed at maintaining the political relationship as it stood. Foreign Office officials were sensitive to the King's request in late 1964 that the British not withdraw but also recognised the unpopularity of the British presence in Libya and the Arab world. The Foreign Office was also aware of the political repercussions of replacing the subsidy or requesting the Libyans pay for the maintenance of the facilities. They were instrumental in advising that the subsidy issue be allowed to lapse, to be replaced with unofficial "technical" aid and further advised against an exchange of letters to confirm the new arrangement. The Labour Government sanctioned this policy with little discussion. Thirdly, during this period the Anglo-Libyan relationship became of increasing significance because of the economic benefits the British gained through it. The Foreign Office and diplomatic community in Libya recognised that the facilities, particularly the missions, secured preferential

treatment for British trade in the country, especially in arms. The oil exploration and export market in Libya boomed and there was an emphasis upon the economic benefits, or “valuable fringe benefits”, in policy formulation. These considerations were frequently emphasised.<sup>204</sup>

Despite the planned redeployments envisaged in 1965 the British Ambassador raised concerns over the closure of the Benghazi garrison. The Labour Government’s greater strategic calculations would have implications for British deployments in Libya from 1965.

---

<sup>204</sup> Submission, Libya: Present position of the Treaty Review, 30 September 1965, FO 371/184232.

### 3 East of Suez and Libya 1965-1966

From 1965 to 1967 the Labour Government pursued reductions in defence expenditure and withdrawal from the Libyan facilities, as envisaged by the January 1965 Anglo-Libyan Review, was incorporated into the 1966 Defence Review. The Libyan cuts were part of a general reduction of forces in the Mediterranean which serviced the East of Suez defence strategy and which the Libyan facilities played a diminishing role in. However, the military presence remained important to British interests. They served a limited strategic role and enabled the British to maintain their defence commitment to Libya. This reassured the King's anxieties over Egyptian and Algerian intentions, strategically, sandwiched as the country was between the two Arab Nationalist regimes, whilst enabling the training of British forces cheaply for their East of Suez commitments. The military presence also allowed Britain to steer Libya towards the Western camp through the maintenance of a military and political profile in Libya and reassured Idris of British support. In turn the British were able to exploit trading opportunities. The deployments, particularly the missions, promoted arms sales and support packages and joint training exercises enabled the British to promote their own weaponry.

So important was the military presence, both to the relationship and British interests that officials in London considered reversing plans in 1966 for a withdrawal from Benghazi. However, as Britain's economic position grew perilous in the summer of that year, with strikes, a balance of payments deficit and problems with sterling, withdrawal from the garrison was reconfirmed, given that defence cuts needed to be made. Furthermore, during the 1960s it became questionable about just how far Britain's worldwide bases augmented international influence and, in some instances, such as Libya, it was considered they actually undermined London's political standing in the Middle East. In addition a military presence was seen as impractical and outdated. Sanders stresses, "It was increasingly recognised in the 1960s that, if war

were to break out...it would probably “go nuclear” very quickly” and bases would serve little purpose.<sup>1</sup> Therefore overseas garrisons could not guarantee success on the battlefield and the strategic emphasis was shifting to mobile-forces. To compound criticism further, the bases became a focus for indigenous, nationalist protests in the host country against British and apparent Western Imperialism, as well as against the established pro-Western regimes that allowed the bases to be maintained. As we have seen the military presence in Libya had become the focus for anti-Idris and anti-British demonstrations in 1956 and 1964. Their military value was also questionable given the restrictions placed upon them by article four and because the Sudanese government had prohibited the British use of Sudanese air space , effectively undermining the strategic “southern” air route to Aden, the Indian Ocean and the Far East. The military presence had also become so small that their defence role in Libya was to offer only a delaying and point of entry facility for reinforcements.

The rejection of a defence strategy based on overseas military facilities was resisted within government and by officials. This was because, as Sanders has noted, treaty obligations remained, there was a lasting perception of the potential military strategic value of bases and bureaucratic inertia prevented a wide ranging policy overhaul of the concept of maintaining bases.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the case of Libya, the Wilson Government were increasingly aware of the benefits the Libyan military deployments offered. Therefore, during this period British policy remained committed to the Libyan deployments; although as a result of economic difficulties and financial stringency the facilities were reduced to the minimum practical level. To continue to service the Libyan defence commitment the Government sought, unsuccessfully, US military support. In addition, the cost of maintaining the remaining presence led the Foreign Office and MOD to examine the Labour Government’s proposal of getting the

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role* (Basingstoke/New York, 1990), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-114.

Libyans to pay, but this was judged too diplomatically and politically sensitive a matter to approach the King about.

### 3.1 Strategic Contraction

From 1964 ministers, service chiefs and senior officials met to consider Britain's future defence policy. What emerged over the next four years was a strategic realignment as defence costs were cut; the result of worsening economic conditions in Britain and the Labour Government's political commitment to funding a social agenda. Successive defence reviews focused first on military hardware, the "capabilities", that served Britain's overseas commitments, and then "commitments", until it was accepted that a withdrawal from East of Suez and the overhaul of Britain's defence strategy was necessary. This shift in strategy had implications for the Libyan facilities.

Initially the Labour Government was committed to the East of Suez role. The Prime Minister Harold Wilson, a staunch supporter of the Commonwealth and highly knowledgeable in foreign affairs, "dominated decision making in this area" during Cabinet.<sup>3</sup> At Chequers in the autumn of 1964 the Labour Cabinet reaffirmed Britain's commitment to a peacekeeping role East of Suez, despite the grim economic position.<sup>4</sup> This policy appeared in contrast to that of the Conservatives. Andrew Thorpe considers that that party had been convinced by the Suez fiasco "that the empire/commonwealth had largely exhausted its utility" and the future lay with the Common Market. Labour only came to this realisation much later in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, economic problems led the Treasury to urge a strategy of reducing

---

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International policy* (Manchester, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> A. Thorpe, 'Introduction', in P Corthorn and J Davis (ed.), *The British Labour Party and the Wider World, Domestic Politics, Internationalism and Foreign Policy* (London, 2008), p. 16.

expenditure and “singled out...defence and prestige projects” for cuts.<sup>6</sup> Defence equipment projects, including the prestigious TSR2 aircraft were cancelled, helping to produce economies in the defence programme to help meet a £2000 million ceiling set for 1969-1970. These measures were not sufficient and in 1965, to meet a financial gap of £200 million, the focus turned to commitments that might be cut. Libya, along with bases in the Middle East and Mediterranean were amongst the first to be considered.<sup>7</sup> The cost of stationing troops East of Suez during this period were for Aden and Persian Gulf £21 million , East Africa £6 million, Malaysia £63 million and Hong Kong £10 million. This total of £100 million represented 44 per cent of total overseas stationing costs.<sup>8</sup>

Cutting commitments and costs in the Mediterranean would have a direct impact upon Britain’s East of Suez strategy. Libya, Cyprus and Malta provided operational and base functions in maintaining that role and Wilson recognised this. In March 1964 he had expressed concern over Libya’s withdrawal request in a meeting with Prime Minister Home; Wilson believed that to send troops to India, the staging facility at El Adem was essential and he was concerned that without that presence Britain was more reliant upon the Simonstown Agreement. This was a naval cooperation agreement with South Africa that allowed British ships to use the naval base and so police and protect the sea lanes to the Middle East and Far East.<sup>9</sup> As we have already seen Libyan facilities had been a target for cuts since the 1950s. In January 1961 the Conservative Defence Secretary Harold Watkinson stated there was an “urgent need to save overseas expenditure of sterling” and urged relying upon the

---

<sup>6</sup> S. R. Ashton and W. R. Louis (ed.), *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964-1971, Part One, East of Suez* (London, 2004), p. xxxiii.

<sup>7</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> H. Hanning, ‘Britain East of Suez Facts and Figures’ , *International Affairs*, 46 (1966), 254

<sup>9</sup> Note for record, A Douglas Home meets Harold Wilson, 26 March 1964, Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 11/4902, National Archives, London.

availability of reinforcements in Cyprus in order to reduce units in Libya.<sup>10</sup> During the Anglo-Libyan review in January 1965 the Treasury had been concerned over the financial burden involved in maintaining deployments in Libya.

At a Chequers meeting on 13 June 1965, which was part of the Labour Government's defence review process, consideration was given to the "possibilities of achieving defence economies in the light of the current defence review". Cutting commitments in the Middle East and Mediterranean was part of that discussion. These commitments comprised the inter-connected chain of bases of Malta, Cyprus, Libya, Aden, the Persian Gulf and Southern Arabia. The Foreign Office was particularly supportive of maintaining Britain's military position in Cyprus, which incorporated the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, and in the Persian Gulf. They had also favoured maintaining Libyan facilities during the Anglo-Libyan Review.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the Paymaster General George Wigg at the Treasury urged withdrawal from the Mediterranean and Middle East for reasons of cost.<sup>12</sup>

At the Chequers meeting Wilson stressed that this was not the occasion to make decisions on the subject. Secretary of State for Defence Denis Healey suggested that Britain should not determine which worldwide commitments it should maintain or abandon based on "a narrow calculation of the direct economies or political advantage from a specific commitment as against its military cost" but should plan to reduce its commitments and its military deployments in Europe, the Middle East and Mediterranean, and Far East. In the Mediterranean and Middle East, assuming a withdrawal from Aden by 1968, then Britain "should plan to reduce its existing commitments to the Persian Gulf and to CENTO which might possibly allow Britain to dispense with the current highly sophisticated and more expensive intervention capabilities required for the defence" of Libya and Kuwait. As an alternative Healey

---

<sup>10</sup> D (61) 5 mtg, Libya Garrison, 20 January 1961, DEFE 7/2276.

<sup>11</sup> Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, pp. 100, 123-128

<sup>12</sup> G Wigg to H Wilson, 11 June 1965, PREM 13/215.

suggested they look to obtaining a “west about” approach to the Middle East and Far East to replace the over-flying and staging rights of the eastern route. Defence Secretary Healey also urged relying upon the financial support and defence cooperation of Britain’s allies, seeking to maintain Britain’s world role “at a lower cost”. In mid-1965 the Labour Government therefore recognised the need to shrink Britain’s defence strategy role by planning a general reduction in Britain’s commitments, although the East of Suez role had not been abandoned at this stage.<sup>13</sup> Healey later explained that “my problem was to extricate our forces from their commitments East of Suez with the least possible damage to Britain’s influence and to the stability of the areas where they were present”. These priorities were to be of significance to the Libyan commitments.<sup>14</sup>

Following the Chequers meeting a number of departmental studies were conducted into the nature of Britain’s defence strategy in the Middle East and Far East. Both the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office agreed that the two areas offered potential savings because of a planned withdrawal from Aden and the fact that the US and NATO could be expected to maintain the West’s position particularly in the Mediterranean. For example, NATO had an headquarters in Malta, and the US maintained its Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. The Ministry of Defence, in a “costing” study on commitments in July 1965 called for the abandonment of British commitments to CENTO, Libya, Kuwait and Cyprus with the Malta base being reduced to a staging post. The Foreign Office were alarmed by these drastic measures and proposed less savage cuts.<sup>15</sup>

Libya was an important element in generating economies in the Mediterranean because the defence of the country was considered by the government to be reliant upon forces deployed in Malta and Cyprus. The commitment to Libya was projected to

---

<sup>13</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, pp.102,122.

<sup>14</sup> D. Healey, *The Time of My Life*, (Norton, 1991), p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 123.

cost £5 million in 1969-1970, with the British retaining the small point of entry and staging facilities at El Adem, with military support from Cyprus and Malta. If London could abandon its commitment to Libya and reduce its presence to a staging post, then this would in turn lead to a reduction in expenditure in Malta and Cyprus as well as in Libya, to £3 million in 1969-1970. Alternatively, retaining the commitment but sharing with the US “the greater part if it” would keep costs at the same level projected at £5 million, but the commitment would not entail any expense in Malta and Cyprus.<sup>16</sup> The Foreign Office was firmly against reneging upon the treaty with Libya, but agreed to persuade Washington to share the cost of defending the country.<sup>17</sup>

To reconcile opposing positions the DOPC in early August 1965 called for three studies of Britain’s commitment to Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. This led to a report by the Defence and Overseas Policy Official Committee, submitted to ministers for review on 13 and 14 November and at DOPC on the 24 November, when the Labour Government agreed to reduce Britain’s commitments to the Mediterranean.<sup>18</sup> This decision meant that Britain would not maintain naval forces in the Mediterranean on a permanent basis, although the commitment to CENTO would continue. The British strike force at Akrotiri, Cyprus would remain but a stockpile of equipment for reinforcing the Libyan commitment held at Dhekelia in Cyprus was to be run down. Malta was to be reduced to a staging post with a reconnaissance squadron whilst one infantry battalion would be withdrawn from the island. In effect the British

---

<sup>16</sup> OPD (O) (65), Defence report, 8 November 1965, CAB 130/213 Savings were considered too small by closing down one base and it was decided to retain both, while in Malta the effects of UK withdrawal were so disruptive that UK negotiated a longer run down.

<sup>17</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p.125. Cyprus was also linked strategically to the question of “whether or not to abandon the Kuwait commitment and how long the UK should be responsible for the Persian Gulf after the departure from Aden”.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

plan for Libya, which involved redeploying troops and equipment to Libya should the defence treaty be activated had been degraded as now reinforcements would have to come from Britain. The British would try to persuade Washington to take over their commitment to Libya, but if this failed then London would retain a small force to ensure a point of entry at Tobruk El Adem.<sup>19</sup> The decision to withdraw from Aden was confirmed and the obligations to the Persian Gulf, particularly to the defence of Kuwait, would continue. East of Suez strategy would also see reductions in British deployments as the Indonesian Confrontation concluded and by a reduction in remaining forces to a “visible” presence.<sup>20</sup>

These decisions led in part to the Defence White Paper of February 1966. The paper stated that:

“as far as commitments are concerned, we shall be able to keep our contribution in Europe at roughly its present level but only if some means is found of meeting the foreign exchange costs. We shall discharge our commitments in the (Mediterranean) area including those in Libya and CENTO”.

The paper did not mention Libya at length, but its priorities had repercussions for Britain’s involvement in the country. Whilst the British would maintain an East of Suez role, their influence in that region was heavily circumscribed by cuts. Britain would no longer be able to fight even a limited war against a sophisticated enemy. The paper stated that Britain would not undertake major operations of war except in cooperation with allies. Additionally the British would not accept an obligation to provide another country with military assistance, unless that country was prepared to provide facilities to make such assistance effective. Finally, there would be no attempt to maintain defence facilities in an independent country against its wishes. These factors had relevance to the Libyan commitment and meant the British could only conduct major

---

<sup>19</sup> Record of Anglo US Talks, 7 -8 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>20</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 130.

operations in Libya in cooperation with the US; that Britain required the Libyan military presence to conduct those operations and should access to these be denied then the defence of Libya could not be fulfilled. Finally, should the Libyans not wish for those facilities to be maintained then they would be abandoned. The 1966 Defence Review also referred to the relevance of military bases and concluded that “military force is not the most suitable means of protecting” economic interests in the Middle East and Asia, although Britain shared a general interest with “other countries” in “seeing peace maintained” and this “justifies our military presence outside Europe”.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> The Defence Review , Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1966 part 1, Cmnd 2901 (London, 1966), 4-11, 14-15.

### 3.2 Libyan Defence and the United States

British defence plans for Libya were considered feasible despite planned withdrawals envisaged by the 1965 Anglo-Libyan Review and the 1966 Defence Review, which involved the evacuation of the Benghazi garrison leaving only the El Adem and Tobruk facility. These plans were intended to meet an external attack from Egypt and comprised an increase in security of the point of entry for British troops in Libya by redeployment and the introduction of additional air and ground units under the guise of training. This would be followed by a build up of air and naval forces in the Mediterranean with the aim of deterring and if necessary defeating Egyptian aggression. Regular training also enabled the British to maintain the credibility of their forces in Libya.<sup>22</sup>

In attempting to cut expenditure, implementation of the Defence White Paper required drawing Washington into providing support for the Libyan defence commitment. American military support would enable savings on expenditure on the Malta and Cyprus deployments, which served the Libyan defence plan by providing reinforcements to those already deployed in Libya. The rationale behind drawing the US into the obligation was that London and Washington were bound together by mutual interests in global defence, including the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In a DOPC Official Committee Report submitted in November 1965 it was hoped that the Americans, who “have a strong interest in seeing the independence of Libya”, “might be prepared to enter into joint planning on the basis of a reduced British contribution”.<sup>23</sup> There were good reasons to suppose that this might be possible.

---

<sup>22</sup> P Mallet, First Secretary FO to E M Rose, Asst/Deputy Under-Secretary of State FO, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>23</sup> OPD (O) (65), Defence report, 8 November 1965, CAB 130/213.

By the mid-1960s the weakness of sterling and the British economy made Britain's strategic responsibilities increasingly difficult to fulfil. In turn the British Government looked to Washington to support sterling. The Johnson administration, fearful that devaluation and erosion of sterling could lead to subsequent attacks on the dollar and harm trading relations between Western powers supported the currency in return for British support for the war in Vietnam and British peace keeping actions East of Suez. This support underpinned and legitimised American policy and helped Washington to maintain a global military strategy. The maintenance of sterling's value was therefore considered vital to US national interests. The Johnson administration had been prepared to offer financial assistance to prop up sterling, sustained by a loan from the IMF in the autumn of 1964 and an international American led rescue operation. In the summer of 1965 pressure on the pound had continued and the British were forced to borrow a further \$1.4 billion from the IMF.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst the Wilson Government's commitment to East of Suez continued to supplement American global defence strategy, the British could expect to continue to extract financial and political support from the United States. It was therefore concluded by ministers and at official level that an approach on the Libyan commitment could well be successful. Of particular mutual interest was the political and security position in the Middle East and the fact that Libya was one of several friendly, conservative Arab states. Washington's concern at rising Soviet involvement in the region had led in the 1950s to the Eisenhower Doctrine which espoused military and economic assistance to any state in the Middle East threatened by international communism. This doctrine replaced the role formerly played by the British in the

---

<sup>24</sup> Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, pp. 6, 116. Callaghan claims the American support for sterling came from a perception of the threat to the dollar and the International Monetary system. See J. Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London, 1987), p. 176.

region, prior to the Suez crisis of 1956.<sup>25</sup> The Eisenhower Doctrine was not only directed at preventing Soviet encroachment but was utilised to contain the radical Arab Nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser was perceived by Washington as an agent of Soviet expansionism from whom the General acquired weapons, so opening the Middle East to Moscow's influence. Therefore the United States provided aid and protection to moderate Arab states to retain their allegiance, isolate Nasser and undermine Soviet political approaches.<sup>26</sup>

US-Egyptian relations were to become highly fractious and to a point where Little claims that "for every occupant of the White House from Eisenhower to Nixon" dealing with Nasser "was tantamount to dining with the devil". As a result Washington "hoped to exorcise the demon of Nasserism and shield Western regimes from revolutionary change".<sup>27</sup> Despite this Petersen recognises that during the 1960s and particularly during the Johnson administration the United States resisted forceful intervention in the region whilst the President and his advisors questioned the value of continued interest in the Middle East as a result of Nasser's and Arab radicals' anti-americanism and tilt towards the Soviet Union. Meanwhile Nasser continued to hold it to be his duty to eject Western influence and colonialism from Arab lands and he was highly regarded by many Arabs.<sup>28</sup> President Johnson was "sceptical" about diplomatic approaches to Nasser partly because of Nasser's support for revolution in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Third World. Cairo remained committed to supporting an Arab Nationalist regime in the Yemen and was calling for the export of revolution to

---

<sup>25</sup> R. Ovendale., *Britain and the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East* (London, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> S. Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine in the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2004), p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> D. Little, *American Orientalism, The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (London, 2008), p.181.

<sup>28</sup> T. Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East 1961-1969, A Willing Retreat* (Eastbourne, 2006), pp. 2-3, 17-18.

Libya, Saudi Arabia and Jordan as well as supporting the nascent PLO. Nasser's support for the Viet-Cong, allowing them to open an office in Cairo in 1966 and his criticism of the Shah of Iran, an ally of Washington, led "some top policymakers...to write Nasser off" altogether. In 1966 Walt Rostow, who had recently become Johnson's National Security Advisor became a staunch critic of Nasser, especially over Cairo's continued criticism of American policy in Vietnam.<sup>29</sup>

Washington saw Britain as a vital ally in the Middle East, and the British continued to be active in the region, despite the Suez crisis and the withdrawal of Iraq from the Baghdad Pact in 1958. Military intervention in Oman between 1957 and 1959, troops sent to Jordan in 1958 and Kuwait in 1961 and counter-insurgency operations in Aden and the Yemen illustrated continued British interest in the region.<sup>30</sup> Thereafter during the 1960s Washington and London cooperated "effectively in the main to maintain their influence" in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

An approach on Libya by London was also considered likely to be successful because Washington and London had mutual interests in the country. Like the British the Americans maintained a base facility at Wheelus. This base served a diminishing strategic role but was one of 375 American foreign military bases which had grown by the mid-1960s as part of the American policy of containing the Soviet threat. Washington was reluctant to remove themselves from these bases, finding new missions for them as time passed.<sup>32</sup> Bombers were originally based at Wheelus but by the mid 1960s the strategic value of Libya to the US global strategy had dwindled as the focus of its nuclear deterrent shifted from long range bombers to intercontinental missiles and B52s. The base was used for fuel storage and target

---

<sup>29</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, pp.185-186.

<sup>30</sup> Owendale, *Britain and the United States*, pp 198-241.

<sup>31</sup> Petersen, *The Decline*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> C. Sanders, *America's Overseas Garrisons, The Leasehold Empire* (Basingstoke/New York, 2000), p. 16.

practice but the strategic value of Libya, particularly in oil production and the huge American stake in the industry was growing. Wheelus also served as a major employer for the local population and accounted for a US investment of \$450 million dollars by 1965.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Washington and London considered Libya an important strategic ally in North Africa. The Foreign Office stressed that the British shared a general interest with other Western governments in making sure that Libya, sited between Egypt and the Maghreb, develop as a stable and prosperous country, linked to the West or at the very least not closely linked to the east and the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> The US considered the Wheelus base, like the British facilities, as a bulwark to Nasserite aggrandisement in North Africa. David Newsom, the US Ambassador to Libya regarded Wheelus as a symbol of the US Libyan relationship.<sup>35</sup> In 1963 the British and Americans were concerned enough to protect their interests in Libya by formulating a plan , “Four Square”, that outlined action to be taken to ensure the Crown Prince’s succession upon the death of Idris and to maintain a pro-Western regime.<sup>36</sup>

During Anglo-American talks in March 1965 both countries had agreed that continuing attention to Libya was justified, because the independence, stability and economic welfare of the country were of a major importance to the West and because of the overflying rights and oil production.<sup>37</sup> At the time Washington had been informed of the planned reductions in the British presence, in line with the 1965 Anglo-Libyan Review. Later that year Washington referred to a diplomatic initiative they were planning , which would inform King Idris that the US would be prepared to

---

<sup>33</sup> G. Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke/New York, 1993), p. 157.

<sup>34</sup> FO Report, British policy towards Libya, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>35</sup> J Dodds, First Secretary FO, 20 October 1965, FO 371/184232.

<sup>36</sup> FO Report, British policy towards Libya 1963, 3 September 1963, CAB 21/5574.

<sup>37</sup> UK proposals for defence of Libya, Annex A, January 1966, FO 371/190489 (Annex A was passed previously to the USA, December 1965).

oppose any unprovoked and aggressive attack on Libya and would join with the British in discussions on the best means of defending Libyan territorial integrity.<sup>38</sup> The diplomatic initiative was the “Johnson letter”. In June 1965 Idris asked Washington to enter into a defence treaty with Libya. President Johnson responded with a “Letter of Interest in the Territorial Integrity of Libya”, which stated that the United States regarded as highly important the political independence and territorial integrity of Libya and they could not remain indifferent to an unprovoked and aggressive attack on Libya. In such an event the President would consult with the Libyan Government and other interested countries on the appropriate steps to take. The President made clear that the “maintenance of friendly military facilities within Libya provided a continuing deterrent to such aggression and would be a significant factor in their ability to lend assistance in such circumstance”.<sup>39</sup> The British saw an opportunity to persuade the United States to develop this “letter” into a firmer political and military commitment to the defence of Libya. A report by the DOPC (Official) in November 1965 considered “we can probably persuade them, because of their concern for Libya, to accept the guarantee to defend Libya as a shared commitment of which they carry the greater part”.<sup>40</sup>

On 13 November Defence Secretary Denis Healey promoted the concept of drawing Washington into taking responsibility for the protection of Libya at a meeting of ministers and officials.<sup>41</sup> On 24 November at the DOPC it was agreed that Britain “should seek to persuade the US Government to take over our commitment in respect of Libya”. The British were prepared to retain, if necessary, a small force at El Adem,

---

<sup>38</sup> Memorandum Statement, Anglo American talks on Libya, March 1965, FO 371/190489.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix B to JIC (A) (69) 15 (Final), Text of President Johnson’s message to King Idris of Libya, CAB 186/2.

<sup>40</sup> OPD (O) (65), Defence report, 8 November 1965, CAB 130/213.

<sup>41</sup> Record of meeting, ministers, service chiefs and senior officials, Defence Policy, 13 November 1965, CAB 130/213.

to ensure a point of entry and staging facilities should the Americans request it, but this would be of limited cost and reduced in size.<sup>42</sup> As we have seen, the Chiefs of Staff, in March 1964, had concluded that RAF El Adem with an armoured car squadron and a minimum infantry company at Tobruk would be sufficient to provide a point of entry for British forces should the defence treaty be activated by the Libyans.<sup>43</sup> Politically the Foreign Office considered that it was “impossible” to hand over the commitment to the US, as the Johnson administration opposed British withdrawal “strongly”. Consequently the British would have to keep some forces in Cyrenaica and encourage Washington to provide support for these.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, against the backdrop of the 1966 Defence Review it was concluded that Washington would, as a consequence, put up strong opposition even to the imminent British withdrawal from Tripoli in February 1966.<sup>45</sup>

In January 1966, John Root, Director of the State Department’s North African Affairs section informed the British Embassy in Washington that a British withdrawal from Libya was unsettling in an already fragile strategic environment. He considered the British had a special relationship with Libya, which the USA could never replace, as the British were “better politically suited”. He added that the US State Department was reluctant to take on this role because Washington was already under pressure to take a supportive role in Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>46</sup> However, from there onwards British ministers and officials endeavoured to procure an American commitment to the defence of Libya. At talks in Washington on 27 January 1966 between US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Denis Healey and Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, the British sought clarification of Washington’s commitment to Libya, whilst offering an explanation of the nature of proposed British

---

<sup>42</sup> OPD (65) 52 mtg, 24 November 1965, CAB 148/18.

<sup>43</sup> OPD (65) 52 mtg, 24 November 1965, FO 371/190489.

<sup>44</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell, 7 January 1966, FO 371/190489.

<sup>45</sup> Note, Libya and Defence Review, 15 February 1966, FO 371/190489.

<sup>46</sup> R Owen, Third Secretary Washington, note, 18 January 1966, FO 371/190489.

defence cuts. Attempting to draw the Americans, Stewart said withdrawal from Dhekelia in Cyprus meant the British could not carry out its defence commitment to Libya which was supported through the Cypriot base and McNamara accepted this but stated that no overt commitment from Washington was necessary.<sup>47</sup> Rusk explained that “it was not clear how long the United States would wish to keep its base in Libya but so long as the base remained, its presence implied a certain degree of commitment. The US did not wish to make its commitments any more formal”. As a result Washington was only willing to hold “contingency discussions” rather than “contingency planning” for the defence of Libya and stressed that Britain and the US should “keep closely in touch over Libya on a week to week basis”.<sup>48</sup>

Healey explained that Britain’s commitment to Libya, consisting of the entry point at Tobruk and El Adem would require heavy reinforcements from the British mainland, as the Cyprus Dhekelia and Malta bases, where the British maintained troops in support of Libya, were to be run down. Reaction time would be slower and Healey believed that this delay could be compensated by a greater formal commitment from the US. This was the bait the British attempted to use to draw Washington into the commitment. Rusk deflected Healey by explaining that this would have to be discussed within the Johnson administration, but Idris already had an assurance from the President which the US could not go beyond, although Rusk called for further discussions.<sup>49</sup>

Anglo-American talks, at the official level were held between 1 and 5 of February 1966 in Washington. The talks focused on Africa and Libya was once more

---

<sup>47</sup> Record of meeting, Foreign Secretary Stewart and Defence Minister Healey and Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defence McNamara, 27 January 1966, PREM 13/2758.

<sup>48</sup> Record of meeting, Stewart and Healey and US counterparts at the State Department in Washington, 27 January 1966, FO 371/190785.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

discussed. British objectives for these talks, as previously, were to persuade Washington to enter a formal commitment enabling the British and Americans to share the obligation to defend Libya. If a formal commitment could not be arranged then officials hoped an Anglo-American arrangement, including an American agreement to joint planning for defence of Libya, would be suitable. The Foreign Office considered that Washington was already overly committed in Vietnam and therefore it was unlikely that they would commit militarily and certainly not formally.<sup>50</sup>

This did not mean the approach would be unjustified on a military basis because Washington would have a contingency plan for Libya and it was hoped his could be dovetailed with British plans. A further military reason to suppose that an approach was likely to succeed was that Britain's defence plan for Libya had been based on a concept of operations agreed in an Anglo-American study on Libya in 1962. The plan was defined as primarily to deter Egyptian aggression by demonstrating intention and ability to defend Libya. It was hoped new defence plans could be formalised, possibly in a private minute, in which both governments recorded their willingness to support each other in assisting Libya.<sup>51</sup>

The talks failed to achieve much of benefit for the British delegation.<sup>52</sup> It was clear the Johnson administration were reluctant to enter into any new political commitment, but US representatives appeared to understand the problems over the rundown of Dhekelia and the need for the British to maintain the treaty commitment. Sir Roger Allen, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office stated that at the official level the State Department appeared to appreciate British difficulties but were "bound

---

<sup>50</sup> Libya Defence Review, Decision Brief No 5, Anglo American talks on Africa, 1 -5 Feb 1966, FO 371/190489.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> J A Thomson, First Secretary FO to J Graham , First Secretary FO, 7 February 1966, FO 371/190489.

by strict instructions from the top”.<sup>53</sup> Washington had agreed to talks continuing, in London. These March talks were to explore, as Rusk stated, “exactly where the problem lay, whether in availability of forces, logistical support or political commitment”.<sup>54</sup>

The Anglo-American defence talks in the early part of 1966 were more productive on the discussion of mutual strategic interests and illustrated Washington’s perceived importance of the Libyan facilities to wider strategic policy. The Johnson administration’s concerns over British defence cuts and those in Libya were assuaged. The British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Patrick Dean, considered that the most important point in Washington’s eyes was that the British were “maintaining a military presence in Libya” and whilst they did not appear worried by the reductions in Cyprus, they hoped the British would “maintain a significant capacity for intervention”. The Ambassador believed the talks “created a mood of sympathy to replace the anxiety and even mistrust which had been building up over the last few months” over the 1966 Defence Review and they had avoided leaving “explicitly or implicitly the impression that the United States own military and political commitments have been extended, or that they are being left to carry on the burden of Western defence on their own”.<sup>55</sup> Dean’s assessment appeared to have some validity given the warm reception President Johnson gave the Defence White Paper. On 3 March 1966 the President expressed his “great admiration” for Wilson’s “courage and the masterful way” in which he had handled “the problem of matching your resources to the needs of Britain and the free world”.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> R Allen, Superintendent Under-Secretary, North and East African Department, FO to B Burrows, Deputy Under-Secretary of State FO, 15 March 1966, FO 371/190489.

<sup>54</sup> Record of Anglo American Talks, 7-8 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>55</sup> P Dean to FO, 2 February 1966, FO 371/190785.

<sup>56</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p.158.

Meanwhile US responses in January and February to British requests for sharing the Libyan defence had led to some confusion in London. The Foreign Office was unsure what was planned for the March talks and whether or not they had any chance of securing a commitment from the US. Sir Roger Allen suggested that if the British could get the Americans to undertake “coordinated military planning”, then the British might achieve a result that the Americans themselves would consider “not too bad” from their point of view. This planning agreement might then be made into a political commitment.<sup>57</sup> However, at the end of February the Washington Embassy reported that the Johnson administration was “decisively opposed to any extension of the US commitment in Libya”, largely on account of increasing involvement in Vietnam.<sup>58</sup> The Foreign Office still considered it was necessary to pursue the March talks to try and reach a mutual agreement on the nature of the threat to Libya and to identify the military problem which would arise when Britain removed the Dhekelia stockpile. Furthermore the Foreign Office sought “to see if it would be technically feasible to fit in an American contribution to the defence of Libya”.<sup>59</sup> The Foreign Office hoped that with patience the Americans would be drawn in.<sup>60</sup>

The talks on 7 and 8 March in London were in two parts, covering an examination of the threat to Libya and the current military plans and how these would be affected by the proposed reductions in forces in the Mediterranean. The United States delegation emphasised the continuing strategic value of Libya to the US and the West whilst Root emphasised that the Anglo-Libyan treaty was useful for intervening in Libya. Despite the cuts the US delegation hoped Britain would continue with the military as well as the political aspect of the treaty and stated that whatever brought

---

<sup>57</sup> R Allen to B Burrows, Deputy Under-Secretary of State FO, 15 March 1966, FO 371/190489.

<sup>58</sup> R J R Owen, Third Secretary to D J Speares, 25 February 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>59</sup> Arthur, Head of Permanent Under-Secretary's Department, FO to R Allen ,1 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>60</sup> G G Arthur, note, 14 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

British intervention, would bring about US intervention. Geoffrey G Arthur, Head of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department at the Foreign Office attempted to tease out an American explanation of their commitment, by pointing out that it would be hard to imagine circumstances in which the US would stand aside. John Root reservedly said that if things went wrong then the US would want to get with the British and consult.<sup>61</sup>

The British representatives also sought to discover the attitude of US officials to further British reductions and on negotiating an end to the Anglo-Libyan treaty. The reply was that Washington would view this with great concern and could not see itself as fulfilling the same role politically in Libya. Dean Rusk had previously made it clear that Washington could not add to its commitments and John Root said that British withdrawal was a terrible thought and could not be entertained.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore the British also tried to induce the Americans to make a contribution to British military contingency plans, by once more emphasising the weakened logistical arrangements caused by withdrawal from Malta and Cyprus. By 1968 it was considered that there would be no stockpile at Dhekelia, Cyprus (though the eventual introduction of new aircraft would to some extent offset this loss). There would also be no Royal Navy ships stationed in the Mediterranean and the Luqa airbase in Malta might cease to be available as a base for the V bomber reinforcements. As a result there would be a corresponding reduction in the Libyan deterrent. British forces in Cyrenaica would have no reinforcements nearer than 1500 miles, leaving them seriously exposed. The British concluded that "their position would only be acceptable with US military and naval backing".<sup>63</sup> This portrayal of the British military situation was not strictly true and was used to draw out a commitment from the USA. The Ministry of Defence revealed on 3 March 1966 that with the introduction of new transport aircraft in 1968 it

---

<sup>61</sup> Record of Anglo American Talks, 7-8 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

would be possible to mount an operation in Libya from Britain.<sup>64</sup> It therefore seemed the removal of the stockpile at Dhekelia would not “tear the heart out of our plans for Libya”.<sup>65</sup>

The American delegation stressed that there were problems with Washington’s involvement in Vietnam and the legal position of US intervention in Libya. Jeffrey Kitchen, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Politico-Military Affairs at the State Department was willing to go back to Washington to examine how the British military gap might be filled. Whilst the State Department might be agreeable to closer liaison by US and British planners on this problem, it would not formally increase its commitment. Root had said that the US did not want to get involved in joint contingency planning with Britain and Libya, but was amenable to a contribution to the deterrent. Rusk was reported as remaining interested in continuing the exchange of political and military information on present lines.<sup>66</sup>

The British concluded that United States officials had been given strict instructions to limit the discussions to an exchange of views on how to “study the problem and narrow it down, with the understanding that the US was unable to consider further commitments”. The US attitude appeared more rigid and the talks were considered “diffuse”. Despite this Geoffrey G Arthur concluded that the British had achieved limited objectives. The US had generally agreed about the political threat to Libya, and discussions would take place through intelligence channels on reaching a joint assessment of the scale of the Egyptian menace. The US delegation undertook “to

---

<sup>64</sup> J Killick, Counsellor Washington to A Brooke Turner, First Secretary FO, May 1966, FO 371/190491. In the summer the British exaggerated the requirement to 36 C130 air transport sorties per day for 15 days. seemed to stretch the requirement to make it look more serious than it actually was and this didn’t go unnoticed by the USA.

<sup>65</sup> G G Arthur, note, 14 March 1966, FO 371/190490.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

raise the matter in Washington, with a view to seeking a modification of instructions to the US element of the Anglo-American planning group, so that coordinated military planning could take into account the problems which would arise in British plans” as a result of the Defence Review. The United States delegation also agreed that it was unlikely a situation would arise in which British forces were resisting Egyptian intervention and American forces were not. Arthur believed the British could not have got any more from the talks and that the United States delegation accepted that they should be ready to help with air lift and naval support, although the American contribution was woefully less than what British ministers were expecting. Indeed Labour ministers had hoped Britain’s contribution could be limited to air support and securing a point of entry and the United States could be drawn into a solid commitment to Libya’s defence. In Arthur’s opinion the most the British could hope for was that Washington would fill the gap and he concluded that “It’s going to be a long process to get the Americans even thus far”.<sup>67</sup> The subsequent process was indeed slow. Talks on a US contribution to the defence of Libya continued into the summer of 1966, within the sphere of a pre-existing Anglo-American military planning group on Libya. Discussions focused on the logistic requirements of supplying British troops through US air support, rather than from Malta and Cyprus, but little was achieved to the advantage of the British.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile the British economy continued to deteriorate. The White House, US Defense Department and US State Department were particularly concerned about the effects of the falling pound on British defence policy, but gave the impression that they believed the British could maintain commitments, while at the same time cutting back expenditure. Washington was averse to the Labour Government using the devaluation of sterling as a remedy for the ailing economy because they saw the pound as “the first line of the defence for the dollar”.<sup>69</sup> Washington was well aware

---

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> OPD (O) (DR) (WP) (66) 15, memorandum, MOD, 21 June 1966, CAB 148/54.

<sup>69</sup> P. Ziegler, *Mountbatten* (London, 1986), p. 587.

that the British could “threaten us on defence” which was “their biggest lever” but by mid-1966 there was “growing scepticism in Washington as to whether Britain would be able to fulfil the promises Wilson made on defence and this was compounded by a sense of resignation about Britain’s precarious economic position. Britain was now a liability rather than an asset”. US Under-Secretary of State George Ball suggested the United States “should relax our pressure on Britain to do things that she will either refuse to do or will do only at substantial cost to us”.<sup>70</sup>

In July 1966 a further financial crisis hit sterling and speculation grew of a possible devaluation of the currency. The Labour Cabinet chose deflationary measures and sought further cuts on defence expenditure. On 20 July the Cabinet discussed the possibility of making cuts of £100 million, half of this being achieved by accelerating the redeployment of troops as had been planned in the 1966 Defence Review. Despite the cuts, at the Washington Summit on the 29 to the 30 July 1966 Wilson told Johnson that he was “resolutely determined to solve Britain’s balance of payments crisis” without devaluing the pound and insisted that the Britain would not “shirk” from its responsibilities East of Suez. He insisted that the savings of £100million sought on the defence budget would not alter the policies set out in the 1966 Defence Review.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p.168.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.160,166.

### 3.3 The Facilities and Political Relations

The British garrison left Tripoli in February 1966. As a result of the conclusions of the 1965 Anglo-Libyan Review and the January 1966 Defence Review it was expected that the Benghazi garrison would close at some point in 1967. However, as we have seen, there were strong arguments raised in the Foreign Office and by the Ambassador for maintaining the deployment. The debate on Benghazi and the policy decisions taken in 1966 shed light on officials and the Labour Governments' approach to the Libyan facilities and the economic importance of the deployments.

The Foreign Office considered that King Idris' political position in Libya had improved during the course of 1965, whilst conversely, his main adversary, President Nasser, had found his position in the Arab world had diminished. King Idris, a solitary man, had a strong tendency to retreat to his palaces or the desert, but he remained a popular figure. The King's political pedigree, born of his leadership during the war and his relatively simple ascetic lifestyle made him a respected character. Furthermore his self imposed distance, both personally and geographically from mainstream politics in Libya isolated him from the more harmful criticism of anti-Western Nasserite propaganda. However his over reliance on the influential Shelhi family did undermine his credibility. Ibrahim Shehli had been his principle assistant for forty years until his murder in 1954. He was succeeded by his sons: first Busiri, killed in a car accident in 1964, and then Omar. The Shelhi family were considered "utterly corrupt" but held considerable influence and power in Libya.<sup>72</sup>

Nasser meanwhile was considered to be no longer "riding high" in Arab politics. Egypt had been drawn further into the war in Yemen, committing troops against a

---

<sup>72</sup> D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 70.

Royalist counter insurgency and alienating still further conservative Arab regimes.<sup>73</sup> The war was a huge financial drain upon the Egyptian economy and Cairo looked to court favour from oil rich monarchies. However Kerr notes that there was a major ideological cleavage between the Arab Nationalist Cairo-Damascus-Sana axis and the conservative monarchies of Amman-Riyadh. Many members of the Arab League, including Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, and Kuwait were targets for Arab Nationalist states. They were “more or less vulnerable to ideological denunciation by the Syrians and subversion by the Egyptians” because they were conservative in political orientation.<sup>74</sup>

The Libyans remained concerned with their own strategic security. In particular there was “a growing feeling in Libya.....that Libyan oil is too priceless a commodity to be allowed to fall into the hands of Egypt”.<sup>75</sup> The Cyrenaican oil fields in the east seemed especially vulnerable to Cairo’s designs. A further threat came from a military revolution in Algeria in 1965, which effectively ringed the Libyan monarchical state with Arab Nationalist regimes and made the country even more vulnerable.<sup>76</sup> The Libyans had been concerned by a potential military threat from Algeria, first under the regime of Ahmed Ben Bella and then Houari Boumedienne, because both leaders had been developing in Algeria a socialist and authoritarian political system, diametrically opposed to that of the monarchy in Libya. The construction of a direct road from Amenas to Ghadames in Algeria in 1963 established a direct link with Libya which the Libyans considered had “military objectives in mind”. Algeria’s chief competitor in oil and gas was Libya and speculation of an Egyptian-Algerian “secret plan” for a pincer attack on Libya circulated at this time.<sup>77</sup> The US Ambassador at

---

<sup>73</sup> G G Brown to I Lucas, First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Tripoli, 4 May 1966, FO 371/190491.

<sup>74</sup> M. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, Gamal ‘Abd Al-Nasir and his Rivals 1958-1970* (Oxford,1971), p.125.

<sup>75</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>76</sup> MOD to J Dodds, 23 May 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>77</sup> A Humbaraci, *Algeria: A Revolution that failed*, (London, 1966), p. 148.

large, Averell W. Harriman, considered that the Algerian revolutionaries were not nearly as extreme as Nasser, but the Libyans frequently drew attention to the threat from Algeria in discussions with the British.<sup>78</sup> The presence of British facilities not only reassured the anxious King but reaffirmed a commitment to the protection of Libya's territorial integrity. Furthermore the Algerian interest in Libya, like Egypt's, was also a threat to British and Western strategic oil and political interests in the region given that Idris' regime was a pro-Western Arab monarchical regime. As the King's position in Libya had grown stronger and external dangers escalated, there was corresponding Libyan political pressure on the British to remain at their present facilities. The Foreign Office considered that the Libyans saw Britain's presence in the country in a "new light" given the continued threat from Egypt and Algeria.<sup>79</sup> The Libyans had an altogether more welcoming attitude to Britain's position in Benghazi, given the value of the Cyrenaican area in oil resources and Libya's vulnerability. British forces now appeared more defensive.<sup>80</sup>

As we have seen, the DOPC on 3 February 1965 had agreed to a withdrawal from Benghazi sometime in 1967. Ambassador Sarrell continued to have "considerable doubts about the wisdom of deploying to the El Adem area" and during 1966 the future of the Benghazi facility was reconsidered.<sup>81</sup> There were a number of benefits associated with remaining at Benghazi. Firstly the deployment was essential to the "bluff" that the British considered prevented Egypt from attacking Libya. Secondly the British now had their own growing interest in Libyan oil, exploited and exported from Cyrenaica, making a British military presence there significant. In April 1967 CJD

---

<sup>78</sup> Ambassador at Large, W Averel Harriman, memorandum, 12 December 1966.FRUS,1964-1968,XXIV,Africa,31.

Available from [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxiv/d.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxiv/d.html) [5 February 2010].

<sup>79</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>80</sup> G G Brown to I Lucas, 4 May 1966, FO 371/190491.

<sup>81</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

Frost, Major General, Officer Commanding HQ Malta and Libya, called for maintaining the British presence in Cyrenaica and recasting the treaty, especially as oil would make Libya a stronger exporter than the Gulf. Frost concluded that Britain should be prepared to stay there for the security of the oil companies who feared sabotage from Arab Nationalists.<sup>82</sup> The Benghazi garrison also appeared to secure a degree of internal stability and acted as a deterrent to protests in Cyrenaica.<sup>83</sup>

Another argument for the maintenance of the Benghazi facility was the apparent realisation that the value of El Adem was questionable. The air bridge through the region had already been undermined first by the loss of British influence in Egypt in 1956, and the Sudanese restrictions in 1965. The 1966 decision to leave Aden further added to the route's redundancy. We have seen that throughout 1965 there had been some hope that the Sudanese Government, in time, would withdraw the restrictions, but this appeared to be increasingly unlikely. Whilst El Adem would continue to provide staging facilities for aircraft engaged in training, involved in contingency operations in Africa and as a valuable diversion airfield between Malta and Cyprus, the restrictions neutralised the airfield's role as a major staging post on the "east about" southern route to the Middle East and Far East.<sup>84</sup> Secondly the El Adem facility was also becoming expensive as land values rose in the region during 1965 and this added to the foreign exchange payments the British would need to make to extend facilities in Tobruk and El Adem. In 1965 the Chiefs of Staff had instructed the army and air force to review the plan for future deployments but this study had been suspended in March 1966 pending the results of a further defence review and the

---

<sup>82</sup> C J D Frost, MG, General Officer commanding, HQ Malta and Libya, 13 April 1966, FO 371/190491.

<sup>83</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops ,9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>84</sup> MOD to J Dodds, 23 May 1966, FO 371/190492.

quest for a US contribution to the defence of Libya, which would have allowed a reduction of the El Adem and Tobruk presence.<sup>85</sup>

In May 1966 GG Brown, First Secretary at the Foreign Office believed that whilst military grounds would form the basis for a decision on Benghazi, financial grounds would have an influence and this was not surprising given the economic difficulties the Labour Government had to contend with.<sup>86</sup> In June, Head of the Near East and African Department, Denis J Speares, concluded that the political advantage now lay “decisively in favour of remaining in Benghazi”. Politically, nationalist pressure on the British presence had very largely disappeared and “there has been a growing understanding by the Libyans of the importance of the presence of British troops”. In addition, Ambassador Sarrell reported that the King would find it “unpalatable” to receive any communication of a decision to withdraw from Benghazi, particularly as he feared internal subversion more than an external attack, and the most likely site of subversion in his eyes and British calculations would be Tripoli and Benghazi. Any attempted revolution was likely to occur in these cities and to be supported by Egyptian agents. British officials reasoned that a withdrawal from Benghazi would undermine British political support for the regime, in the eyes of Idris’ critics, and remove the “bluff” the British sold the Egyptians about a British commitment to intervene in an internal political crisis in Libya. To remain in Benghazi would serve to keep Egyptian sponsored subversion at bay; although in 1964 the Benghazi garrison had served to attract criticism from Nasser and demonstrations from Libyan nationalists.<sup>87</sup>

On 16 June 1966 Ambassador Sarrell, who had returned on leave to London, met the Chiefs of Staff and, with Foreign Office support, called for maintaining a Benghazi

---

<sup>85</sup> Libya: Future deployment of British army in Cyrenaica, 5 July 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>86</sup> G G Brown to I Lucas, 4 May 1966, FO 371/190491.

<sup>87</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

base. This meeting had come about after Sarrell had demonstrated considerable support for the maintenance of the Benghazi facility following talks with local military commanders in Libya.<sup>88</sup> Sarrell's conclusion was buttressed by Head of the NEAD at the Foreign Office, Speares whose own conviction was that there were good political and military reasons for staying, based on a trip he made to Libya himself.<sup>89</sup> This had led the Foreign Office to raise the issue with the Ministry of Defence, above any financial considerations. From a military perspective the Chiefs of Staff concern was for securing the minimum required garrison presence in Libya to implement the defence plan<sup>90</sup> As we have seen the 1966 Defence Review was to lead to changes in the British military presence in Malta and Cyprus. If defence review targets were to be met, Libyan defence had now to be considered against a near complete withdrawal from Malta, rundown of the stockpile in Cyprus and substantial reductions in administrative support there. The 1966 Defence Review had envisaged an American political and military contribution, which could lead to deployment reductions in the El Adem and Tobruk facility. At the Anglo-American talks in March the Americans were not prepared to enter into a formal commit to Libya, simply offering to modify instructions to the US element of US/UK joint planning group so that coordinated military planning could take into account the problems which would arise in British plans as a result of 1966 Defence Review. Therefore the British were still required to service the defence requirement of the treaty.

During the early summer of 1966 Service Chiefs reconsidered the three prospective Libyan deployments. Course A specified one unaccompanied infantry company at Tobruk on rotation from Gibraltar and one unaccompanied armoured car squad at El Adem, housed and administered on a shoestring basis. Course B was based on the maintenance of one unaccompanied infantry company at Tobruk and one unaccompanied armoured car squadron in Benghazi with minimum essential

---

<sup>88</sup> COS 30 mtg, 16 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>89</sup> Libya: Future disposition of British troops, 9 June 1966, FO 371/190492.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

overheads. Course C was the current facility of one unaccompanied infantry company at Tobruk and one accompanied armoured reconnaissance regiment (less one squadron in Cyprus) at Benghazi.<sup>91</sup> The Chiefs of Staff concluded that, this time, course C best met the political and military requirements. On 19 July 1966 course C was accepted but the Chiefs recognised that course C might be unacceptable to the Treasury due to the additional £500,000 foreign exchange cost required to finance this option by remaining at Benghazi.<sup>92</sup>

Other financial issues occurred in the summer of 1966 related to the Anglo-Libyan relationship. As referred to earlier, during the summer of 1966 the Cabinet were looking for further ways to reduce costs as part of a £100 million savings exercise on foreign exchange, which had been proposed by Callaghan on 20 April. Subsequently, in the course of the Cabinet's discussions the concept of getting the Libyans to pay for base facilities emerged and led to a ministerial decision in Cabinet, on 20 July 1966, that the Libyans should be asked to pay the whole foreign exchange cost of forces in Libya.<sup>93</sup> Defence Secretary Healey indicated that Hong Kong already provided some contribution to the stationing of troops and thought it reasonable to ask Libya and Brunei to pay for stationed troops as they were both enjoying large oil revenues. He estimated that "this might produce a further saving of about £5 million (and) on this basis the total of defence savings which would be about £55 million".<sup>94</sup> Wilson endorsed Healey's call.

---

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Memorandum, COS 2132, 10 November 1966, FO 371/190495.

<sup>93</sup> DOPC (O) Committee, Defence Review Working Party, DRWP, section 5g of the 12 mtg, British forces in Libya as affected by the UK economic situation, 3rd August 1966, FO 371/190493.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

At its meeting on 27 July 1966, the Defence Review Working Party (DRWP) requested consideration on the practicality of obtaining from the Libyans a “subvention” to the cost of stationing troops. The Ministry of Defence recommended the DRWP should seek ministerial approval for an early approach to be made to the Libyan Government requesting payment. The cost of British military facilities in Libya in the summer of 1966 was cited at £5.1 million per annum. Should there be a redeployment from Benghazi the total costs would be a projected £2.3 million. The Ministry of Defence believed that there was a good case to ask the Libyans for a contribution because the Libyan economy was “buoyant” and the British could not be expected to exclude Libya from the “global search for economies” in foreign exchange costs. To withdraw from Benghazi would not help any approach to the King to fund remaining British deployments, but the MOD concluded that the Libyans should be required to pay for British forces in Cyrenaica.<sup>95</sup>

The Foreign Office was firmly against such a move. On 3 August John Dodds, First Secretary at the Foreign Office, said it would be hard to sell the idea of paying for a British presence to the Libyans, particularly as Libya was not a colony like Hong Kong and Brunei.<sup>96</sup> The Foreign Office emphasised that the King had already agreed, in February 1965, to a change in Britain’s financial commitment, the subsidy, despite opposition from his ministers. As a result the major part of the technical and military assistance programme was now provided by the cost of maintaining the military and naval missions which had existed before the termination of the subsidy. The Foreign Office believed, therefore, that London had obtained Idris’ cooperation in securing a substantial reduction of Britain’s financial obligation under the treaty. They concluded that this markedly reduced the chances of obtaining further concessions from the Libyan Government to pay for the military commitment. The Foreign Office also argued that Libya was a foreign and independent country and it was politically

---

<sup>95</sup> OPD(O)(DR)(WP)(66)20, memorandum, Libya, MOD, 5 August 1966, CAB 148/54.

<sup>96</sup> J Dodds, note, 3 August 1966, FO 371/190493.

impossible for an Arab country to be seen to pay for such facilities, which would have consequences for Britain's relations with other Arab states. Asking for payment could also lead King Idris and his ministers to question the reliability and economic and military strength of Britain. Finally, despite the booming economy, the Libyans could well not even be in a position to pay: The King might find it difficult to pay because 70% of oil revenue was for development and only 30% for general budget and this in turn could put the Libyans in an embarrassing position. The cost of stationing forces in Libya was already offset by ample trade opportunities particularly in military orders and oil investments. The Foreign Office considered that "we are convinced that the confidence we enjoy as a strong treaty partner is of material importance in maintaining and expanding these valuable trade links". Furthermore, the Libyans held large sterling reserves in London and asking for payment from the Libyans could lead to the deposits being withdrawn from the Sterling Area, thus weakening sterling further. The Libyans had been persuaded not to withdraw sterling in 1964.<sup>97</sup> The Foreign Office concluded that no approach should be made for a "major contribution".<sup>98</sup> Within Britain's diplomatic community in Libya similar sentiments were expressed. Peter Wakefield, Counsellor and Consul General in Benghazi warned that any request for the Libyans to pay for the deployments would also be counter-productive for it could put Britain's increasing trade in Libya and in the Arab world under threat.<sup>99</sup>

As a result, the Defence Review Working Party on 16 August 1966 accepted the impracticability of obtaining any Libyan contribution, but because the issue came from ministers it was decided that these views would have to be brought to their attention. At the end of September the Foreign Office suggested to the new Foreign Secretary George Brown, who had been appointed in August 1966, that it would not be in British interests to request a contribution. Brown considered that it was bad tactics to circulate a paper to his colleagues proposing such a reversal. He was not wholly

---

<sup>97</sup> Memorandum, Libya, 5 August 1966, FO 371/190493.

<sup>98</sup> OPD(O)(DR)(WP)(66)22, memorandum, Libya, FO, 5 August 1966, CAB 148/54.

<sup>99</sup> P G A Wakefield to FO, 8 August 1966, FO 371/190493.

convinced by the arguments against the request.<sup>100</sup> He suggested that as the idea came from the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office may wish to sound them out and, if the departments concurred on the issue, he would speak with Healey and they would send a letter saying the proposal should not be followed up.<sup>101</sup> Brown's approach to management in the Foreign Office was to attempt to reduce the written workload and convene briefings and "thrash out particular issues" which enabled him to have wider background knowledge on any issue.<sup>102</sup> In the event the Foreign Office failed to make any progress with the Ministry of Defence as it was considered that they were honour bound to support their minister.<sup>103</sup>

Pressed to make significant defence cuts, Healey was frustrated that he could only make £20 million savings instead of a £75 million target which had been agreed and he continued to pursue a Libyan contribution, hoping to dress it up so it would be more palatable to the Libyans. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, George Thomson, discussed the question with Healey on 10 October and it was agreed that Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence officials should be instructed to prepare an agreed paper for presentation to the two ministers on the prospects of obtaining a Libyan contribution and how this might be presented. Healey would then consider whether it could be forwarded as a joint paper by himself and Brown.<sup>104</sup>

The line taken in the joint draft paper was very much a reiteration of the Foreign Office's appreciation of the issue from August. There were "very strong" arguments, "financial, economic as well as political, against approaching the Libyan Government

---

<sup>100</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell, 6 October 1966, FO 371/190493.

<sup>101</sup> Memorandum, Cost of British forces in Libya, 29 September 1966, FO 371/190494.

<sup>102</sup> G. Brown, *In My Way* (London, 1971), pp.162-163.

<sup>103</sup> Memorandum, Cost of British forces in Libya, 29 September 1966, FO 371/190494.

<sup>104</sup> R O'Neill, First Secretary FO to R Allen, 10 October 1966, FO 371/190494.

with a request to meet the foreign exchange costs of our forces in Libya".<sup>105</sup> Libya was an independent Arab country and as a consequence it was almost impossible for Idris to subsidize the British presence and Libya had already dropped the subsidy. The economic consequences of an approach were emphasised. A request would be damaging for political relations and would have financial consequences for sterling and would damage exports. The conclusion was that the political, economic and financial arguments were overwhelmingly strong against requesting payment from the Libyans as "at present we enjoy a special and favoured position with the Libyan King and government and we derive tangible benefits from this. A request for financial assistance would come as a shock to the Libyans and the confidence and goodwill which we at present enjoy would be shaken seriously".<sup>106</sup>

On 20 October 1966 George Brown discussed the draft joint paper with Healey. Healey suggested that if a paper was to be circulated it should be by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs only. Brown accepted this but said that he would prefer to let this rest for the time being until "as and when the Treasury start pressing for action".<sup>107</sup> However the idea of asking the Libyans to contribute to the cost of forces in Libya was dropped without any paper being circulated to ministers. Speares, aware of the political and economic consequences of a request to Libya, did not want the subject reopening. The Cabinet's decision to request payment for the facilities from the Libyans had been symptomatic of the climate at the time in Whitehall. Speares believed that the costs of missions and forces in Libya got blurred in a "climate ...of ruthless cutting of expenditure of all kinds"<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Draft, FO and MOD, Cost of British forces in Libya, October 1966, FO 371/190494.

<sup>106</sup> Defensive brief, Libyan contribution to defence costs, DOPC, Government Oversea Expenditure, 19 October 1966, FO 371/190494.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell, 28 October 1966, FO 371/190494.

In fact the £100 million defence cut Callaghan had called for earlier in the year did not end the pressure from the Treasury for further savings. They had been disappointed with the result of the recent Defence Review during which the defence budget of 1969/1970 had not been brought down to a £2000 million target. "Public expenditure was rising faster than the growth of GNP.... chiefly the result of the expansion of expenditure on social provision". In the aftermath of the July financial crisis Callaghan had requested a further reduction of defence expenditure to a new ceiling of £1850 million by 1970/1971. The Ministry of Defence and Healey were willing to look at these cuts, but the Chiefs of Staff believed this would be impossible without re-examining the political restriction Wilson placed on them. This restriction was that any defence economies must be achieved "without altering the basic lines of external policy on which the 1966 Defence Review was founded".<sup>109</sup>

Meanwhile the question of maintaining the Benghazi facility had still not been resolved. The matter was being considered by the Ministry of Defence, but no doubt mindful of the required cuts in defence, Speares did not wish to press for the retention of a deployment there, if it was more costly than El Adem and Tobruk.<sup>110</sup> In November 1966 the Foreign Office told Healey that whilst the political advantages of staying in Benghazi were strong they did not wish to press for it if it could only be achieved at a foreign exchange cost higher than that of El Adem provided for in Defence Review option A.<sup>111</sup> The financial commitment of maintaining the facility at Benghazi was therefore considered too great. Whilst political and military reasons had influenced officials to reconsider a withdrawal from Benghazi during 1966, the economic pressures to withdraw proved too great. On 24 November 1966 the Chiefs of Staff finally agreed that the future deployment in Libya should be that provided for in the Defence Review, course A and evacuation from Benghazi would be completed by the

---

<sup>109</sup> Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*. pp.172,173.

<sup>110</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell, 28 October 1966, FO 317/190494.

<sup>111</sup> Memorandum, COS 2132, 10 November 1966, FO 371/190495.

end of 1967.<sup>112</sup> This did not stop Ambassador Sarrell, who had consistently argued in favour of keeping a presence in Benghazi asking for a “high level” visit to check over the facts. He remained concerned that the decision was false economy, as land values continued to rise in El Adem making the redeployment all the more expensive.<sup>113</sup>

In addition Washington continued to show concern over British cuts in the Libyan facilities. In December 1966 the US Ambassador to Libya, David Newsom, said the United States Government had a strong desire that British forces should remain in Libya as on the spot evidence that the British intended to fulfil the treaty commitment. Washington considered that any reduction in British forces was regrettable and they hoped that a complete withdrawal from Benghazi would not be necessary.<sup>114</sup>

The prospects of swaying ministerial views on the Libyan facilities appeared unlikely to succeed. The defence priorities of the Labour Government were beginning to shift determinedly towards a withdrawal from East of Suez and costly Libyan deployments such as those in Benghazi could not be maintained if defence commitments were to be further reduced. At Chequers on 22 October 1966 Healey put forward defence saving proposals to a small gathering of ministers including Wilson and Brown. This was Healey’s response to requested further cuts following the summer sterling crisis and consisted of cuts in the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR), combined with a 50% reduction of the forces in the Far East from the level agreed in the Defence Review. In the Persian Gulf cuts could be found by not sending a second battalion to Sharjah in the Gulf and the strategic value of CENTO would need to be reconsidered. Reductions in the CENTO obligation would enable the British to

---

<sup>112</sup> J H Gibbon, M-G Chiefs of Staff, memorandum, COS 2172, 24 November 1966, FO 371/190495.

<sup>113</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 10 December 1966, FO 317/190495.

<sup>114</sup> Record of Conversation, US Ambassador to Libya and D J Speares, 15 December 1966, FO 317/190498.

withdraw forces in Cyprus and it was recognised that Libyan facilities were of limited use to CENTO. In the event the Chequers meeting “considered (this) the basis of an approach to a further defence review”. On 10 November 1966 the Labour Government announced that it would reapply to join the Common Market which signalled Britain's growing economic and political interest in Europe and strategic realignment from East of Suez. Subsequently at DOPC on 9 December ministers decided that there should be a “full study of the political and military implications of total withdrawal from the Far East”.<sup>115</sup>

The economic crises of July 1966 began the process which was to lead to the withdrawal from East of Suez and by 1967 the Labour Government found it difficult to maintain a global strategy as balance of payment and sterling problems occurred and unemployment rose. There was a growing consensus that government spending overseas had become a crucial element in balance of payments problems, because this spending did not come back to Britain through purchases of British goods and services.<sup>116</sup> Michael Dockrill states that “Wilson and Healey were forced by each successive financial crisis to withdraw from bases and commitments which they had only shortly before insisted were essential”.<sup>117</sup>

Pham believes the sterling crisis of 1966 “opened a major split within the ruling economic triumvirate” of Wilson, Brown, Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and Callaghan, the Chancellor. Brown argued that it was time to re-examine Britain's international role and that should be re-orientated to Europe. Furthermore, he was in conflict with Callaghan over the projected defence cuts.<sup>118</sup> Brown was moved to the Foreign Office and his position would assist in Britain's shift away from South East

---

<sup>115</sup> Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, pp.174,175.

<sup>116</sup> D. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York, 1991), p. 230.

<sup>117</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 91, 95.

<sup>118</sup> P.I. Pham, *Ending East of Suez* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 113-114.

Asia and the East of Suez policy.<sup>119</sup> Pham believes the sterling crisis signalled that the consensus within the government on the direction of British foreign policy was starting to dissolve. Furthermore economic departments were no longer willing to accept the political departments' definition of the necessary extent of Britain's defence role and became much more vigorous in pursuing tighter defence expenditure, rather than accepting the FO's assurances that Britain's position was already at a minimum acceptable to allies.<sup>120</sup> Dockrill concludes that the 18 July 1967 Supplementary White Paper on Defence "represented the Wilson Government's final admission that financial and political realities had made the sacrifice of the major part of British responsibilities East of Suez inevitable".<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>121</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945*, pp. 91, 95.

### 3.4 Conclusion

From 1965 to 1966 The Anglo-Libyan relationship remained important to both parties but the British military presence was reduced to the minimal requirement considered suitable to service the treaty defence requirement and provide staging facilities to East of Suez. The presence of British deployments in Libya played a diminishing role in London's strategic focus East of Suez. The Labour Government and Foreign Office initially believed that the facilities had some continued value to the CENTO and East of Suez commitments but as economic difficulties grew the Labour Government sought cuts in defence commitments. These cuts fell upon deployments in the Mediterranean and included Libya, Cyprus, and Malta. The practical strategic value of the Libyan facilities also came under some scrutiny whilst the concept of maintaining military bases was questioned. A revised British policy on military deployments was resolutely stated in the 1966 Defence White Paper, as defence expenditure was scaled back.

Defence expenditure cuts led to an attempt by the Labour Government to draw Washington into a defence commitment to Libya, to reduce London's financial obligations to Libya's defence. The British were aware that both London and Washington had shared strategic interests as well as mutual political and defence concerns in Libya. This course of action proved ineffective, the Americans considering that they had enough of a political commitment in the "Johnson Letter". At the same time Washington came to the realisation that the British probably could no longer be relied upon to supplement US global defence strategy, as they had done since World War Two, given the weakness of the British economy. In July 1966 Healey looked for further ways of reducing defence expenditure and mooted the idea of requesting the Libyans pay for the deployments, but the Foreign Office rejected this

approach, feeling this would undermine the valuable relationship, British economic developments in the country and generally harm London's position in the Middle East.

Within Libya the British presence remained an integral part of the relationship. This was brought out during the debate over deploying troops in Benghazi. Withdrawal had been accepted during the 1965 Review but was re-examined because of Libya's importance, particularly in terms of oil and trade. The Libyans grew concerned with their security, especially in Cyrenaica and because London was keen to maintain and reassure the regime, officials considered preserving a military presence in Benghazi. Libya's diminishing role in an East of Suez strategy also shifted British priorities from securing a staging post at El Adem back to holding the original point of entry at Benghazi, the "bluff" to Nasser, for strictly defence purposes. The Foreign Office, MOD and British diplomatic representation in Libya strongly urged the retention of the Benghazi garrison but the need to enforce economies in defence spending, pursued by the Labour Government, ended this plan.

Despite the planned withdrawal from Benghazi, the Anglo-Libyan political relationship was reaffirmed through London's continued defence obligation and the maintenance of the remaining facilities at Tobruk and El Adem. The British took advantage of training privileges and promoted economic interests in the rapidly developing economy of Libya. Meanwhile, whilst the significance of the facilities to British policy East of Suez had declined, London had a strategic interest in maintaining Idris' pro-Western government in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Libyan regime welcomed British protection. Events from the middle of 1967 would put great strain on the relationship and threatened to undermine London's and Tripoli's mutual interests when Tripoli requested the withdrawal of British forces in June 1967.

## 4 The Six Day War 1967

In the summer of 1967 British military facilities in Libya were an RAF staging post at El Adem, a garrison of army deployments at both Benghazi and Tobruk and El Adem, limited stockpiles for training and for operations in support of the Libyan defence plan, as well as naval and military missions. On 5 June the Six Day War broke out and protests against Israel and the West occurred in Libyan cities. The Benghazi garrison was involved in rescue operations in the city, providing refuge to the entire British and American population. Mobs attacked the British and American embassies in Benghazi and burnt down the British reading room, a NAAFI club (the trading organisation of the UK military) and a number of Jewish shops. Riots went on from ten in the morning until eight in the evening. British forces had always steered clear of becoming visibly involved in Libyan internal affairs and no request from the Libyan Government for British military assistance was received. In any case the Consul General, Wakefield, in Benghazi believed “it was questionable how effective they (British forces) could have been if they had been called upon to intervene” because they were so busy looking after the expatriate community. Wakefield concluded that the tide of hostility to the West now “seemed to swing the balance of advantage against the retention of troops in Benghazi”.<sup>1</sup> Ambassador Sarrell commented that “truly hysterical emotions ...were unleashed in Libya” which he believed had been inspired by Egyptian, anti-Western propaganda, broadcast through Radio Cairo. Teachers, students and mob leaders, themselves trained in Egypt, led street level opposition to the government.<sup>2</sup> The “Big Lie” accusation that United States planes, operating from the Wheelus base had helped Israeli forces was broadcast from Cairo Radio and further inflamed the situation. Ambassador Sarrell felt that

---

<sup>1</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>2</sup> R Sarrell, Libyan Annual Review for 1967, 5 January 1968, FCO 39/344.

Egyptian propaganda “caused (a) week of trouble”.<sup>3</sup> The Libyan media carried Egyptian propaganda, which did not help matters and Sarrell was not happy about this because the Libyan Ministry of News and Guidance had denied UK embassy staff any communication with the Libyan population. The Ambassador saw a political gap between government and people and he felt Libyan students needed political education and guidance.<sup>4</sup> However he recognised that Libyan youth were also influenced by feelings of strong anti-colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Although Wright claims the political violence in the country was “not characteristic”, particularly because the regime had previously managed to crush opposition, events illustrated the depth of feeling against military deployments in Libya.<sup>6</sup>

A Libyan Government request for the withdrawal of Western forces was inevitable following this political disruption, intensified by criticism from other Arab nations of the Libyan Government’s weak and vacillating policy on the war. Tripoli’s failure to commit emphatically to the Arab cause had only increased the criticism. Libyan Prime Minister Hussein Maziq’s withdrawal request on 15 June assuaged popular domestic and pan-Arab discontent. A state of emergency was declared, a curfew imposed and a ban on meetings and demonstrations was announced as strikes by the Port Workers Union, ordinary workers and students engulfed the country. Libya joined an Arab oil embargo on Britain and the USA, which had been announced on 6 June 1967, in an effort to further dampen criticism. Wright considers that the events of June 1967 were a “clear warning that the days of the monarchy were ending”. The regime felt threatened enough to later put on trial and imprison seven leaders of the oil workers on charges of incitement and demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 19 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>4</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 22 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>5</sup> Ambassador’s Despatch , 8 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wright, *Libya a Modern History* (London, 1981), p.102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

The Labour Government initially saw the withdrawal request as an opportunity to end the treaty obligation to defend Libya and to withdraw from the remaining facilities, but the perceived value of the relationship to British economic and training concerns tempered the government's response. Ambassador Sarrell saw the King on 22 June and Idris agreed that the Benghazi garrison should pull out in the autumn; Idris pointedly asked that the El Adem facility should remain. He regarded this as security for himself should he be forced to flee in the event of a revolution.<sup>8</sup> The King replaced Prime Minister Maziq, who had resigned on 27 June, with Abdul Qadir al-Badri on 1 July and a degree of order was restored. Ambassador Sarrell believed that the King had been eager to remove Maziq and restore confidence.<sup>9</sup> The calmer atmosphere witnessed an improved tone towards the British in the Libyan media. The Arab wide oil embargo against the West was maintained only until the Khartoum Arab League Summit meeting on 27 August, which allowed Libya to resume oil exports. At the conference the Libyans agreed to donate £30 million in aid to Egypt and Jordan. Libya commenced the shipping oil to Britain, the US and West Germany on 4 September.

Improved relations were also a result of Libya's separate talks in August with Britain and the US on the topic of the liquidation of foreign military facilities and the withdrawal of forces. It was at these talks that the principle of the Benghazi withdrawal was accepted by the Anglo-Libyan negotiation team. In separate talks the Americans agreed to allow an observation group into the Wheelus Airbase, although there was to be no withdrawal. The remaining facilities at Tobruk and El Adem enabled the British to service the defence obligation and, along with the missions and joint training exercises, continue to promote British trade in Libya. The economic importance of the Anglo-Libyan relationship grew as Libyan oil exports increased and revenue made the country extremely wealthy.

---

<sup>8</sup> E M Rose, memorandum, to Private Secretary, 26 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>9</sup> Draft MOD Paper, 29 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

At the same time British strategic contraction gathered pace as the Labour Government fought with economic problems at home and implemented further cuts in defence spending. The strategic redundancy of the Libyan military deployments was underlined by events during the war and Whitehall finally appeared to accept, at the official level, that the deployments were of no use as staging and over-flight facilities to the East of Suez role. Despite Washington's protestations, British strategic withdrawal East of Suez and in Libya continued and British foreign and defence policy refocused upon Europe. The Foreign Office and MOD showed concern with the strategic threat to Libya and those regions bordering the eastern Mediterranean from the Soviet Union, Algeria and Egypt. The Libyan Government also remained anxious over Algerian and Egyptian intentions towards Tripoli's oil but was politically and diplomatically vulnerable to criticism from those Arab states for being too closely aligned to the West. Meanwhile London sought to rebuild its political and diplomatic standing in the Arab world.

## 4.1 The War and Anglo-Libyan Relations

In the aftermath of the June withdrawal request British officials sought to secure, and then subsequently rebuild the Anglo-Libyan relationship. The aim of officials was to maintain El Adem and Tobruk and preserve Britain's position in the country. The Anglo-Libyan treaty was due to expire in 1973, although the treaty would continue thereafter unless one of the parties gave a year's notice of unilateral abrogation. The reaction to the Libyan Government's withdrawal request illustrates the premium the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence placed upon securing political advantage through a military presence. Officials promoted a reinterpretation of the treaty in order to retain this political advantage and so British interests in Libya. In contrast the initial reaction of the Labour Government shows the continued priority the Cabinet placed upon withdrawal, as part of the strategy of economic retrenchment and cuts in defence expenditure.

The initial withdrawal request made at the height of the Six Day War appeared to be a Libyan Government political expedient; pandering to nationalists in Libya and a symbolic demonstration to other Arab governments that Libya was not in the Western camp. The call was initiated by Prime Minister Maziq who Ambassador Sarrell perceived had probably convinced King Idris to "jettison this ballast" of the British bases, to court favour with Arab states in the aftermath of the war.<sup>10</sup> From the British side, withdrawal from the bases would entail cost-saving benefits which would be commensurate with the current strategic policy of withdrawal. However Chiefs of Staff were concerned with the security implications of withdrawal. The Libyan regime would be more vulnerable to external attack from Egypt and internal subversion from anti-

---

<sup>10</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 15 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

government groups because the bluff of a military presence would have been withdrawn.<sup>11</sup>

British officials need not have been too concerned with the implications of the withdrawal request; the final decision on whether or not the British stayed was ultimately with King Idris. From the initial request for withdrawal the Libyan position changed as Idris reasserted his authority and subsequently diluted the original proposal in order to retain the political relationship with the British. Idris had a tacit understanding with British diplomatic representatives in Libya, who were well aware of his need to balance an apparent independent political stance in Libya, whilst continuing to harbour personally strong and somewhat sentimental ties to the British. Ambassador Sarrell saw in the Libyan Government's June request an opportunity "to play the same game as the King and take advantage of the situation to trim our dispositions in Libya" without giving the King the feeling that he was being abandoned.<sup>12</sup> He surmised that "the King is playing for time and may well back track when it suits him" and suggested that "unlike 1964 there was no mention of abrogation of the treaty".<sup>13</sup> Indeed Minister of State, Suleiman Jerbi, stated that negotiations for withdrawal would only be a continuation of the 1964 talks.<sup>14</sup> Ambassador Sarrell recommended preserving the treaty, whilst taking the opportunity to reappraise "the justification of attempting to fulfil our defence commitment to Libya through retention of a British military presence".<sup>15</sup>

Sarrell's interpretation of the situation appeared to be valid. On 18 June Sarrell reported Prime Minister Maziq appearing friendly but "somewhat defensive and

---

<sup>11</sup> Annex A to COS 74, Report on effect of withdrawal, 27 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>12</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 16 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>13</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 15 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>14</sup> Cypher /Cat A, 16 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>15</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 17 June 1967, DEFE 24/313, R Sarrell to FO, 20 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

apologetic and as regards the bases he seemed in no hurry having achieved his immediate political objectives". Maziq admitted that the announcement on bases had been made "to help the Libyan delegation at various Arab meetings" and to calm public opinion. The announcement had also enabled the regime to resist pressure for the rupture of Anglo-Libyan diplomatic relations and Maziq did not appear to be in any hurry for detailed negotiations to start.<sup>16</sup> Sarrell urged a swift response "if we are to safeguard our interests here", so as to avoid further hostility in Libya and other Arab countries towards Britain.<sup>17</sup> He believed that British interests could best be secured by improving Libya's security forces and counter subversion policy whilst withdrawing from the Benghazi garrison, which only the previous year he had sought to retain.<sup>18</sup>

The Foreign Office considered the request to be a "major policy issue" which required some deliberation. British Government policy, as outlined in the Defence Review of February 1966, which the Foreign Office quoted to the Ambassador, stated that "there will be no attempt to maintain defence facilities in an independent country against its wishes". Sarrell was briefed to say that "we are prepared to enter immediate discussions for the application of this principle to the British military facilities in Libya".<sup>19</sup> At ministerial level, preliminary discussion between Foreign Secretary George Brown and Defence Secretary Healey concluded with them agreeing that this was an opportunity for Britain to withdraw from the treaty obligation, saving valuable foreign exchange costs on the facilities. This approach was based on an interpretation that without deployments in Libya Britain could not carry out defence commitments, an interpretation the Chiefs of Staff endorsed.<sup>20</sup> In Cabinet on 20 June 1967 the view was expressed that "we should not aim as we were doing at present to retain our forces in Libya in the hope that the situation there would become calmer

---

<sup>16</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 18 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>17</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 15 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>18</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 20 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>19</sup> FO to R Sarrell, 15 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>20</sup> COS 51 mtg, 20 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

and the request for their removal be withdrawn, but that instead we should seize the opportunity to withdraw these forces quickly". The Labour Government therefore supported a complete withdrawal from Libya.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the politicians, military chiefs and the Foreign Office were eager to stress the benefits the British enjoyed directly or indirectly through the maintenance of the treaty and facilities and their arguments would influence Cabinet policy. The Foreign Office concluded that, from the Ambassador's information, the desire to get out of the treaty obligations would have political and economic repercussions and could lead to loss of most if not all arms exports to Libya and probably a sharp drop in other exports.<sup>22</sup> The Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, Paul Gore-Booth advised that the policy should be played "fairly long, in the hope that events might develop in such a way as to enable us to retrieve something while giving up whatever the Libyans might continue to insist on".<sup>23</sup> Foreign Office policy remained committed to maintaining the minimum required presence necessary to service the defence obligation; that was El Adem and Tobruk. A Foreign Office memorandum on 29 June 1967 summarised the British approach, which was to seek to understand the true nature of the Libyan request, whilst considering alternative ways of maintaining the treaty and privileges should the withdrawal demand be for total evacuation by British troops. The Foreign Office was anxious for the treaty to be retained because of the benefits the British secured from it. Training and RAF staging facilities were considered "of value" but "what is of greater importance is that the treaty, the presence of British forces in Libya and the existence of a substantial Libyan market for our exports must all be regarded as part of a whole. Without the treaty we could not expect Libya to look to Britain as she now does as a major source of imports".<sup>24</sup> The

---

<sup>21</sup> Extract minute of Cabinet meeting, 20 June 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>22</sup> D J Speares to E M Rose, 19 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>23</sup> P Gore Booth, Permanent Under-Secretary of State FO to D J Speares, 16 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>24</sup> Memorandum, Libyan bases, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

Ambassador urged retention of the 1953 treaty both for the training facilities and trade benefits the British obtained. Trade in 1966 included arms purchases worth £12 million with a £50 million contract in the offing and a general Libyan import market worth £28 million.<sup>25</sup>

The withdrawal request also threatened to undermine Britain's defence capability in Libya, because total withdrawal would make military plans unworkable. British forces were in Libya to serve "as a deterrent, to secure points of entry for reinforcements, to provide an initial screen and to hold the necessary stockpiling of heavy equipment". The British also found it necessary to liaise with the Libyan army and Cyrenaica's Defence Force. Without Tobruk and El Adem the Defence Planning Staff considered it was "difficult to envisage continuous training in Libya" which enabled the British to fulfil their defence plan for Libya by demonstrating an effective deterrent.<sup>26</sup> Although the treaty did not specifically compel Britain to keep troops in Libya, a DOPC review of British forces in Libya from July 1967 stated "its fulfilment obliges us to do so. The commitment under article two would be far more difficult to fulfil without our small garrison in Libya to secure a point of entry".<sup>27</sup> Total withdrawal would also effectively annul the treaty as under article three the British were to be furnished with facilities to enable them to provide for the defence of Libya. However, the Government's 1966 Defence Review had stated that policy was to make no "attempt to maintain defence facilities in an independent country" and the "UK Government can only provide military assistance if facilities are provided".<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> E M Rose to Private Secretary, 26 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>26</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>27</sup> OPD (67) 64, British forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>28</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

A withdrawal, which would undermine Britain's ability to fulfil defence commitments, so negating the treaty, could potentially lead to the loss of benefits associated with a close Anglo-Libyan relationship. Foreign Office officials were anxious to secure some form of guarantee that would modify the defence element of the treaty and recognise that withdrawal of all forces from Libya was "incompatible with a continuing commitment to aid in the defence of Libya ", but would enable the British to retain the benefits the treaty had secured. Specifically the Foreign Office was looking for a "fairly precise definition of the limits" to which the British would come to Libya's aid, in the expectation that this would exclude military aid in the event of outside attack. They also suggested that the offer of equipment and technical assistance, for Libya's security forces and armed services, and assistance in countering subversion might be a suitable substitute.<sup>29</sup> The ferociousness of the demonstrations signalled to the British that the regime was highly vulnerable to criticism from internal opposition, not least because they entertained a Western military presence. The social and economic dislocation that ensued and mounted each year, as a result of the conditions brought about by the receipt of oil revenues was exploited by Cairo in both 1964 and 1967. However, Ambassador Sarrell felt that Libyan youth were motivated to demonstrate not just by Egypt propaganda but also by a deeply felt anti-colonialism and as a reaction to the British base presence.<sup>30</sup> The student movement and trade unions played a significant role in mobilising the poor and those with political grievances. The defence of Libya and British interests now lay in bolstering the regime and reform and extension of internal security.

The Ministry of Defence were also concerned with the potential damage to the military presence as a consequence of the Libyan request. Service Chiefs were keen to hold on to training rights in Libya because these also served wider defence priorities. El Adem offered the only ground area in which it was practicable to carry out large scale training for strategic reserve units economically and under realistic

---

<sup>29</sup> FO to R Sarrell, 21 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>30</sup> Ambassador's Despatch, 8 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

conditions, and “its loss would be very serious”. Bombing and air to ground firing ranges at El Adem were considered the best available within economical reach of the UK, Germany and Cyprus. The desert training areas were used by the RAF V force for conventional low level and radar bombing. The only other available facilities were in Canada or Australia which were expensive alternatives. The Libyan low flying routes were considered “unique”. A report by the Defence Planning Staff suggested that total withdrawal could lead to the loss of training facilities and military missions including liaison with the Libyans, arms sales and unofficial after sales help. The report stated that there was an “urgent need for our future policy in Libya to be decided”; although once the Middle East conflict receded the Libyans would be less “extreme”. The MOD left the initiative with the Foreign Office.<sup>31</sup>

On the 21 June the Foreign Office instructed Ambassador Sarrell to speak to King Idris and stress the link between the treaty commitment and the military deployments and encourage him to focus on the internal threat to his regime. They further advised that any discussion on evacuation should first deal with Benghazi but ‘that we should try to avoid committing ourselves on El Adem’ which was considered important for facilitating training and the defence plan.<sup>32</sup>

The British policy of “playing it long” was, in due course to see the Libyan position on withdrawal change. Whilst Libyan media continued to carry Egyptian based propaganda throughout June, before the end of the month the King was able to reassert his position. The British were also able to promote a more pro- Arab image following George Brown’s Nottingham speech in that month which called for a lasting peace in the Middle East.<sup>33</sup> Ambassador Sarrell was able to see the King on 22 June and Idris agreed that the Benghazi garrison should pull out in the autumn. Idris asked

---

<sup>31</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>32</sup> FO to R Sarrell, 21 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>33</sup> COS 51 mtg, 20 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

that the El Adem facility be retained and he expressly requested that military exercises continue there in the future, probably to warn off the Egyptians from considering any attack.<sup>34</sup> In essence, withdrawal in 1967 was to be a dressed up version of a pre-planned withdrawal dating from 1965. The Ambassador concluded that, in view of the King's remarks about El Adem "he would not raise the subject of the treaty".<sup>35</sup> The Foreign Office believed that King Idris, who still retained ultimate authority, would continue to do his best "to avoid severance of the British connexion in practice".<sup>36</sup>

The Foreign Office believed the best way to preserve British interests in Libya was with the regime of Idris, and the 1953 treaty, to which the King was strongly attached. After all, the King had softened the demands of the previous withdrawal request in 1964 and had accepted and facilitated the dropping of the subsidy. But Britain's political position in Libya had been endangered by the riots in Benghazi and the Foreign Office recognised that the Libyan political setup also had been "badly shaken" and it was going "to be a long time before it recovers". Britain was reliant on the goodwill of the King who was "increasingly out of touch with modern trends in the Arab world", an acknowledgment that Arab Nationalism posed a serious political threat to the Libyan monarchy.<sup>37</sup>

By 29 June, and at the official level, the Libyan Government had not defined which facilities should be withdrawn and no alteration in the treaty had been requested. The Libyan Prime Minister seemed in no hurry to pursue withdrawals, "having achieved his immediate political objective by a public statement on 17 June".<sup>38</sup> On 8 July Ambassador Sarrell sent a lengthy despatch to the Foreign Office with his interpretation of the political situation in Libya following the events of June. Sarrell

---

<sup>34</sup> E M Rose to Private Secretary, 26 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>35</sup> Tripoli to FO, 22 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum on Libyan bases, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>37</sup> P Mallet to E M Rose, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>38</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 18 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

warned that Britain's interests were under threat but strongly urged retention of the treaty. He considered the troop presence was counter-productive. Sarrell believed the treaty was the formal seal on traditional friendship rather than insurance policy against attack but Libya's integrity and political situation had changed and the situation seemed "to merit fresh political study". Sarrell argued that the King's political position was growing weak and the main threat to British concerns and the Libyan regime was Egyptian subversion. Libyan youth, alienated by an unreceptive regime, was motivated by Egyptian propaganda, anti-colonialism and the events of the Six Day War. He believed that Libyan youth just wanted the British to "adapt our relationship with Libya" whilst the problem was "to convince the King himself of the need to turn his attention from the frontiers to the home front".<sup>39</sup>

Sarrell endorsed a withdrawal from Benghazi and suggested that the King be persuaded that the problem was not external defence but defence against subversion, which required improved security and reform of the Libyan political system. London, Sarrell believed, should be prepared to match withdrawal by an offer of advice and training in the field of security and counter subversion. Sarrell did not see article two of the treaty as an obstacle to withdrawal as it did not specify the type of defence aid the British should supply. He thought that Britain was not bound specifically to military action in defence of Libya. Furthermore, he believed that the Libyans would not wish to renegotiate; they had expressed no desire to end the treaty and there was a precedent for this. In 1966 the French Government had approached the Libyans concerning the ten year review of the Franco-Libyan treaty of friendship, pointing out that certain provisions required renegotiation in view of Algerian and Tunisian independence. The Libyan reaction was to ask for the treaty to be left as it stood.<sup>40</sup>

Rather surprisingly Ambassador Sarrell's interpretation of the treaty and Britain's actual commitment was flawed. He was unaware of former British Ambassador to

---

<sup>39</sup> Ambassador's Despatch, 8 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Libya, Sir Alec Kirkbride's note of 29 July 1953 which emphasised that Britain's commitment to defend Libya was through military assistance. Furthermore the Ministry of Defence considered that: "although it might be argued that the treaty does not specifically compel us to keep troops in Libya, its fulfilment obliges us to do so".<sup>41</sup>

Whilst the Foreign Office was endeavouring to maintain the treaty and British facilities in Libya, they developed the concept of a guarantee to secure London's interests into an "exchange of letters" proposal should the Libyans continue to demand a complete withdrawal. Such an exchange of letters would be attached to the treaty stating that the Britain might not be able to come to Libya's aid under article two of the treaty, as a result of a withdrawal. This initiative was purely speculative at the time and would "depend on the decision of ministers how much to withdraw and how much to leave in Libya; and in the texts of the draft notes themselves".<sup>42</sup> The Ministry of Defence had strong reservations about any reinterpretation of the treaty; particularly should there be a limited withdrawal. As long as the facilities remained in Tobruk and El Adem the MOD were satisfied that the military plan would still be implementable.<sup>43</sup> El Adem and Tobruk were seen as interdependent and as points of entry if the plan for the defence of Libya ever had to be implemented. The Ministry of Defence believed that the Libyans had not requested the termination of prime elements of the treaty which facilitated the British defence plan, namely regular training as well as the maintenance of liaison with Libyan forces secured through the naval and military missions.<sup>44</sup> The loss of Benghazi was acceptable because British forces could still implement a "Kuwaiti solution", a reference to the British intervention in Kuwait of

---

<sup>41</sup> OPD, DRWP, Libya; assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, note, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/191.

<sup>42</sup> D H Anderson, Assistant Legal Advisor, to J Dodds, 6 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>43</sup> D J Speares to R Sarrell and P G A Wakefield, 28 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>44</sup> A Campbell, Head of Western Department, FO to R A Sykes, Head of Defence Department, FO, 12 July 1967, FCO 39/119. The Ministry of Defence stressed the importance of upholding Idris' regime to maintain interests.

1961, with the provision of air and sea forces. The only concern the MOD had was with the provision of British land forces to implement the plan, which was dependent on adequate warning time of a threat to Libya. The MOD considered that a proviso outlining this could perhaps be clarified in an exchange of letters.<sup>45</sup> Despite this advised diplomatic supplement to the treaty, the Ministry of Defence feared that any “attempt to reinterpret the agreement....may well jeopardise the wider benefits which we enjoy under it” including training and arms deals.<sup>46</sup> They argued “that retention of the commitment is a small price to pay if we are to avoid a risk of a loss of Libyan confidence”, emphasising the importance of Libya’s relations with Britain.<sup>47</sup> The Ministry of Defence placed responsibility on the issue with the Foreign Office but “misjudging the situation may well rebound on the Ministry of Defence”.<sup>48</sup>

On 15 July the Ambassador met Ahmed Bishti, the Libyan Foreign Minister, who had already spoken with Foreign Secretary George Brown at the United Nations in New York between 19 and 24 June. Bishti claimed the King and Libyan Government’s “firm policy” was “to maintain the treaty indefinitely in the common interests of the two countries”. He considered evacuation of Benghazi would be “a great help to the Libyan Government” but did not wish to hurry the British Government.<sup>49</sup> After considering the Ambassador’s despatch, Ministry of Defence views and the Libyan Prime Minister’s appreciation of the treaty, the Foreign Office believed it would be best to leave the question of renegotiation of the treaty defence commitment and any further withdrawals until British forces were out of Benghazi. Furthermore it would also be best to try to persuade Idris that the requirement for British troops to protect Libya frontiers was no longer realistic and to match a withdrawal by an offer of advice and

---

<sup>45</sup> Draft letter for signature by AUS POL to R A Sykes, 6 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>46</sup> A Campbell to R A Sykes, 12 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>47</sup> D J Speares to E M Rose, 25 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>48</sup> A Campbell to R A Sykes, 12 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>49</sup> Tripoli to FO, 15 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

training to Libyan security forces.<sup>50</sup> The Foreign Office concluded that renegotiation, particularly of article two, was probably not a good idea as the treaty, in its original form, continued to have symbolic force and value as a formal seal on traditional friendship and this also had significance from the point of view of Egyptian perceptions.<sup>51</sup>

A renegotiation of the treaty seemed less likely by the end of July as the political situation inside Libya calmed and Anglo-Libyan political relations began to improve. British goods were now handled in ports (although British flag ships were not yet being accepted) and the Libyan authorities had rounded up anti-government protestors, imprisoning a thousand people in Tripoli over offences related to the events of June. Libyan Prime Minister al-Badri's government was also appreciative on the line adopted by the British regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, which presented a more positive image of Britain in Libya. The British diplomatic community in Libya believed that the Libyans had calmed dissent in the country and answered Arab criticism by demanding withdrawal of British forces. In private the Libyan Government were happy to retain the political benefits the treaty relationship offered them with a continued British military base presence. Abdul Qadir al-Badri claimed that withdrawal from Benghazi would be a great help as the Libyans would be attending an Arab Summit Conference in Khartoum in August.<sup>52</sup>

The Libyan Government announced on 20 July that a joint Anglo-Libyan Committee on the liquidation and withdrawal of British forces in Libya would meet on 1 August in Benghazi.<sup>53</sup> These talks would be focused on the Benghazi facility, as other base withdrawals had not been defined. Wakefield, Counsellor and Consul General at the Benghazi Embassy believed the basic element of the negotiations was the date for

---

<sup>50</sup> D J Speares to E M Rose, 25 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>51</sup> P Mallet to E M Rose, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>52</sup> P G A Wakefield to FO, 27 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>53</sup> Tripoli to FO, 20 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

withdrawal of the armoured regiment in Benghazi and predicted there was “no indication that the Libyans will press for earlier withdrawal than we have been contemplating (in the 1966 Defence Review) but they are keen on announcing quickly a timetable for the handover of the camps in order to convince the public that things are moving”. Badri hoped the British would arrange to leave at their own convenience.<sup>54</sup> The Libyans also announced that a Libyan-US negotiation team were to meet to discuss the Wheelus base on 10 August.

At DOPC on 28 July 1967 London’s position regarding the forthcoming negotiations was considered. A memorandum was presented by Foreign Secretary George Brown which urged probing the Libyans to establish their true intentions, limiting the first round of negotiations to discussion of Benghazi only and leaving the issue of El Adem and Tobruk until the next round, when the British would be in a better position to assess Libyan objectives. The formal reinterpretation of the treaty issue was to be entertained only if the Libyans were to press for the removal of all facilities.<sup>55</sup> The memorandum therefore assumed a continued British presence in El Adem and Tobruk, based on a need to keep the confidence of the King, training rights and trade preferences. The defence commitment would remain unchanged.<sup>56</sup> At the same time it was considered important to secure the regime by persuading Idris that Libya’s integrity needed first to be safe-guarded by Libyan security forces, and that the requirement for British troops to protect Libya’s frontier was no longer realistic. It was concluded that a major effort to encourage the King and the Libyan Government to tackle the problems of internal subversion and winning popular confidence would help to ensure the maintenance of a moderate and pro-Western regime after Idris’

---

<sup>54</sup> P G A Wakefield to FO, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>55</sup> OPD (67) 64, British Forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>56</sup> OPD (67) 28 mtg, brief for Secretary of State for Defence, 28 July 1967, DEFE 11/706.

death.<sup>57</sup> This policy was to be implemented through the building up of the Libyan defence forces.<sup>58</sup>

The scale of the anti Western protests had undermined British faith in the long term future of the Idris regime. Whilst the removal of the facility at Benghazi would benefit the Libyan monarchy from the perspective of the Libyan people, Brown's memorandum also recognised that the Benghazi withdrawal would benefit British interests sometime in the future if a new, possibly pro-Nasserite, nationalist republican regime were to wrest power from the monarchy. Britain's commitment was due to end after 1973 and the memorandum concluded that whilst "the Libyans have already said they would like to continue it indefinitely we can clearly not keep our commitment for longer than the minimum necessary and must use the time" to bolster the regime.<sup>59</sup> The DOPC approved the line taken by Brown in the memorandum.<sup>60</sup>

At the negotiations in August it was immediately apparent that the Libyans did not wish to take the discussions too far, and were only empowered to discuss Benghazi. On 31 July the Libyan team expressed a hope that the British would not raise any question of the treaty or of withdrawal from the Tobruk and El Adem area.<sup>61</sup> The King, having now gained the political upper hand in the country had wanted to reverse the withdrawal request, but was "persuaded to let the decision stand on the understanding

---

<sup>57</sup> OPD (67) 64, British Forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>58</sup> A Campbell, to R A Sykes, 19 March 1968, FCO 39/115 Healey commented in March 1968 "that while it was not right to think in terms of extending the life of the treaty as this stage, our efforts to put the Libyan army on a sound basis might help to end our direct defence commitment earlier than later".

<sup>59</sup> OPD (67) 64, notes, agenda item 3, 28 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>60</sup> OPD (67) 28 mtg, 28 July 1967, CAB 148/30.

<sup>61</sup> W R Tomkys, First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Benghazi, to J Dodds, 5 August 1967, FCO 39/119.

that the request concerned the Benghazi garrison only".<sup>62</sup> The British put forward a six month timetable for withdrawal and by 4 August both sides had agreed in principle on the withdrawal of British units in Benghazi over the following months.<sup>63</sup>

A continued British presence at El Adem was not raised during the negotiations. The DOPC on 28 July had resolved to "probe" the Libyans intentions for El Adem after Benghazi was dealt with, but on 12 August Wakefield warned it was not a good time to open up the subject of El Adem. "The Libyans appear just as wary of stirring up that hornet's nest as we ourselves are".<sup>64</sup> In fact on 18 August the majority view in the Libyan cabinet showed support for a continued British presence in El Adem and Tobruk, not least as a result of fears over Algerian territorial ambitions in Tripolitania.<sup>65</sup> Ambassador Sarrell on 21 August confirmed that the Libyans accepted a continued military presence in Tobruk and El Adem and they were agreeable to the stationing there of an armoured car squadron, as outlined in the 1966 Defence Review.<sup>66</sup>

By early September the talks themselves had not formally ended but having agreed to the withdrawal from Benghazi and secured the continued facility at El Adem and Tobruk as the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence hoped, Ambassador Sarrell concluded that the negotiations for withdrawal should be allowed to expire. The Foreign Office agreed that the question of withdrawal from El Adem should not be raised. The Anglo-Libyan Committee was to meet only as and when required.<sup>67</sup> The Ambassador indicated that the political repercussions of continuing negotiations would

---

<sup>62</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>63</sup> Benghazi to Foreign Office, 4 August 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>64</sup> P G A Wakefield to R Sarrell, 12 August 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>65</sup> R Sarrell to J Henniker, 18 September 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>66</sup> J Dodds, 30 August 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>67</sup> P Mallet to John Henniker-Major, Assistant Under-Secretary of State FO, Superintending Under-Secretary NEAD, British forces in Libya, 8 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

be negative: "It is clear that to suggest withdrawal from El Adem now would produce a sharp and possibly bitter reaction on the part of the King and the Prime Minister". Sarrell saw the "pendulum" as swinging back fast in Britain's favour due to a perceived increasing threat from Algeria to Libyan security.<sup>68</sup>

By September 1967 the British appeared to have achieved their political aims in Libya: to withdraw from Benghazi but to maintain a military presence at El Adem. The treaty and Britain's position were intact. Following a Libyan request the British also agreed to maintain the missions. Ambassador Sarrell was particularly keen in the summer that the missions be instructed to play a fuller role in the technical development of the Libyan armed forces although the Libyan army appeared to show little inclination to train.<sup>69</sup> London considered that they had not yet persuaded the King that it was no longer realistic for British troops to protect Libya and that the Libyans should take responsibility for their own defence, although Tripoli was "taking active steps" in improving their own security.<sup>70</sup> Labour ministers' enthusiasm for withdrawing from the treaty commitment and so reducing overseas expenditure had been tempered by Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence interests in preserving training and trade preferences. George Brown was still concerned by the expense involved in maintaining the remaining facilities at El Adem. He inquired about "how permanent are the works we are proposing? He (the King) is after all old and ill, is he not? Have we looked ahead of this?" Brown was assured that the building works were in any case "demountable" and could be taken away when the British finally withdrew, so saving on the costs of building a permanent facility.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares , 2 September 1967, FCO 39/120. "The pendulum, with the fresh weight of a putative threat of Algerian aggression is now swinging back fast and we are in a way fortunate to have secured the king's blessing on the Benghazi withdrawal so easily".

<sup>69</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 7 July 1967, FCO 39/102

<sup>70</sup> P Mallet to J Henniker-Major, 8 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>71</sup> Response to Secretary of State, minute, 8 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

Operation Bordon, the rundown of the Benghazi garrison, was completed on 3 February 1968. The action benefitted from the easing of tension in the Arab world and the withdrawal was in a “smooth and good honoured fashion”.<sup>72</sup> The remaining units were deployed at Tobruk and El Adem which left the final British facilities in Libya as one infantry company, one armoured reconnaissance squadron, and one vehicle company and associated equipment stockpile. This force amounted to 400 ranks. The recent negotiations did not affect the size of the RAF garrison which maintained the staging post and bombing range at El Adem; the force amounting to 785 ranks. The military mission consisted of 45 personnel and the naval mission at Tripoli numbering 22 personnel to advise and assist in matters concerning the formation, development, equipment and training of the Libyan army and navy.<sup>73</sup> In February 1968 Wakefield concluded that the British move from Benghazi “has probably assisted the Libyan Government to survive”, acting as a “smokescreen” whilst being consistent with Government policy on bases.<sup>74</sup>

London remained aware of the sensitive nature of the remaining facilities for the Idris regime. Restraint was urged when communicating the nature of the move to El Adem: “its implications of prolonged tenure should be delayed as long as convenient and particularly until after the Arab summit conference where the question of the liquidation of all military bases appeared prominently on the agenda”.<sup>75</sup> The Foreign Office did not want to “encourage press interest in our redeployment in Cyrenaica, particularly as it affects El Adem and Tobruk” and wanted it described as a redeployment exercise. The squadron was in effect taking the place at El Adem of an

---

<sup>72</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>73</sup> R A Kealey, Third Secretary Commonwealth Office, memorandum, 6 December 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>74</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>75</sup> FO to Tripoli, 15 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

infantry company brought in from Malta the previous June.<sup>76</sup> The Foreign Office did not want to damage the image of the King and his government by drawing “attention to the difference between the public utterances and private assurances of the Libyans”.<sup>77</sup> The Libyan Government also requested that a resumption of training in Cyrenaican go unpublicized for fear of drawing attention to the continued Western involvement in Libya so soon after the Six Day War.<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion British diplomats were satisfied with the outcome of the 1967 withdrawal negotiations. Wakefield believed it was “remarkable for what has not happened”. The Cyrenaicans raised no protest, many seeing it as inevitable and not in Libya’s interests for the Britain to stay. There was no sign of nationalist triumph or demand for further withdrawal, but this was aided by a muzzled Libyan media.<sup>79</sup> Ambassador Sarrell concluded that the withdrawal was an “unqualified political success”.<sup>80</sup> Looking to the future, Wakefield believed that “the Libyan authorities are prepared to do much to cooperate with the British and particularly with the army with whom they have enjoyed such a long and close relationship”. At the heart of this remained, untouched, the treaty. Wakefield termed the absence of a reference to the treaty during the negotiations, as the “dog that failed to bite”.<sup>81</sup> Sarrell considered the treaty was important in retaining King Idris’ confidence in the friendship with the British; a friendship that gave the British preferences in trade and commercial affairs. This economic consideration was to have continuing influence upon British policy.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> A G Munro, First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Benghazi and Tripoli to FO, 28 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>77</sup> R A Kealey, Third Secretary Commonwealth Office, memorandum, 6 December 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>78</sup> P Mallet to J Henniker-Major, 8 September 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>79</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>80</sup> Tripoli to FO, 17 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>81</sup> P G A Wakefield, memorandum, 9 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

<sup>82</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 17 February 1968, FCO 39/120.

## 4.2 Anglo-Libyan Economic Relations

The economic implications of the Anglo-Libyan relationship had a profound influence upon policy making from 1967. The importance of maintaining and developing British trade with Libya was considered vital bearing in mind the poor health of the British economy. During the 1960s there was a growing preoccupation with Britain's overseas trade position in Whitehall, which led to an emphasis on raising the status of commercial diplomacy and export promotion in the diplomatic service.<sup>83</sup> In 1962 Harold Macmillan appointed the Plowden Committee on Representational Service Overseas partly as a result of this economic consideration, as well as there being a pressing need to revise the structure of British diplomatic representation given the changing nature of Britain's world-wide presence as independence was granted to colonial possessions. The 1964 Plowden Committee Report recognised that British representation should "be given special training for economic and commercial work".<sup>84</sup> Its report (Cmnd. 2276) led also to the merger of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Trade Commission Services into the Diplomatic Service on 1 January 1965.

Britain's economic stake in Libya remained focused upon two aspects of the country's recent development. Firstly, Libyan oil continued to grow in significance to the British economy. Libyan oil supplies were of a high quality and situated to the west and therefore away from the strategically vulnerable Suez Canal that Gulf exports moved through. The Biafran war in Nigeria from July 1967 showed "how vulnerable oil supplies even from outside the Middle East could be" so a Libyan source was

---

<sup>83</sup> W. Wallace, *The Foreign Policy Process in Britain* (London, 1976), p. 36.

<sup>84</sup> Cabinet Memoranda, CP (64) 33, Plowden Report, 31 January 1964, CAB 129/116.

important.<sup>85</sup> Libyan exports of oil to Britain grew enormously at a time when demand from industry boomed and oil-fired central heating replaced coal as a domestic energy source. Additionally, crude oil imports to Britain grew to supply the demand from Britain's expanded refining capacity which consequently benefited the economy. Libyan oil exports benefited from relatively cheap oil prices at the time.<sup>86</sup> As a result the oil industry grew so rapidly that by 1969 it had become the largest producer in the world. Total exports had jumped from \$11 million in 1960 to \$1.168 billion in 1967 and 99% of this was from oil.<sup>87</sup> Output of oil increased from 20,000 barrels per day in 1960 to almost three million barrels per day in 1969. The oil driven boom propelled per capita income in Libya from around \$60 per annum in 1960 to \$2000 by 1970, with the Libyan economy growing at an annual rate in excess of 20%.<sup>88</sup>

Britain's second economic interest in Libya centred on the enormous trade and commercial opportunities which were a consequence of the Libyan oil bonanza. In Libya imports from Britain grew steadily as oil production increased and demand for imports grew. British exports to the country increased from £12.7 million in 1960 to £43.2 million in 1969 whilst Libyan exports to Britain saw an increase from £0.7 million in 1960 to £151.6 million in 1969 mainly as a result of oil exports.<sup>89</sup> The British Government sought to exploit Libya's trading potential for the benefit of an ailing British economy, particularly through the sale of military hardware.

---

<sup>85</sup> K. Thorpe, 'The Forgotten Shortage: Britain's handling of the 1967 Oil embargo', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 204.

<sup>86</sup> F. Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-1987* (London, 1989), pp. 174, 183.

<sup>87</sup> C. Collins, April 1974, 'Imperialism and Revolution in Libya', *MERIP Reports*, (27), 14.

<sup>88</sup> D. Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence* (New York, 1998), p. 50.

<sup>89</sup> Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East*, pp.176, 180.

Commercial opportunities in Libya were also significant to policy makers for two other reasons. Firstly, they complemented British defence and foreign policy as the British sought to wean the Idris regime away from the security guarantee of the treaty, whilst securing a pro-Western government through sales of military hardware. Secondly, British policy in Libya was also part of a larger goal of seeking to maintain and develop global economic and trade interests and one target area for development was the oil producing Arab nations of the Middle East. The Libyan market was tied to the Middle Eastern trade environment because it was an Arab country and relations with the monarchy mirrored and had a bearing on Britain's relations with other conservative Arab countries. The Middle East was already a valuable trading market for Britain as it was a growing exporter of oil to the West and a valuable importer of arms.

The events of June 1967 led to an Arab oil producers' partial embargo against both Britain and the US for their support of Israel, as well as the closure of the Suez Canal, which resulted in a worldwide shortage of shipping and dealt a blow to Britain's balance of payments. This was particularly disturbing given that during the summer of 1967 unemployment rose in Britain and the trade gap increased. The embargo, imposed following the Baghdad Conference of ministers of Petroleum and Economic Affairs in June called for the cutting off of oil supplies to any country believed to be giving aid directly or indirectly to Israel, and was widely supported by Libyan oil workers. Speculation grew as to whether sterling would be devalued. Matters were not helped by the threat to oil production from the civil war in Nigeria. However the British economy managed to survive through 1967. This was partly due to the fact that the oil export ban to the West was rescinded at the Khartoum conference at the end of August after Arab oil producers recognised that it hurt them more than the West to not produce and sell oil. For example, the cost of the 1967 embargo to the Libyan regime was high and led to a loss of £1.5 million per day. However, once the oil embargo was lifted the Libyans were able to sell 10% more oil to Britain in 1967 and then a rise of

over 135% in 1968, when Libya became the largest Middle Eastern oil exporter to Britain, just surpassing Kuwait.<sup>90</sup>

British Middle Eastern trade recovered rapidly after the Six Day War. By 1970 exports to the Middle East accounted for 5.76% and imports from 7.96% of British trade. In 1970 the trade imbalance was £255.9 million in the Middle East's favour as a result of British oil imports which grew from £347.1 million in 1965 to £624.6 million in 1970. Invisible financial and commercial trade with the Middle East had a favourable influence on the balance of payments and British investment in the Middle East was high, almost entirely in oil exploration and development. From the 1960s Kuwait and Abu Dhabi also started to invest heavily in Britain. After devaluation in 1967 the greater purchasing power of oil rich Middle East states offered opportunities for greater British sales, particularly in arms, and as a result exports grew.<sup>91</sup>

Returning to Libya, with the enormous growth in oil production and resultant wealth the British sought to exploit trading opportunities in the country. In 1967 there had been a sizeable and "impressive" British presence at the annual Libyan trade fair held at Tripoli in March, attended by Lord Walston, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Board of Trade.<sup>92</sup> A British commercial centre was opened in Libya in May 1967 to promote trade. British commercial work in Libya was spearheaded by diplomatic representation throughout the country. Both the Consul General and the Head of Chancery at the British embassies in Tripoli and Benghazi were responsible for contacts with government departments on the commercial front. British business

---

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182-185. Trade was aided by Council for Middle Eastern Trade, a non-governmental council. Meetings attended by representatives at official level by the Board of Trade, the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the Bank of England. Its remit was to promote exports to the area.

<sup>92</sup> R Sarrell to G Brown, Libya: Annual Review for 1967, 5 January 1968, FCO 39/344.

visitors and day-to-day commercial work was handled at the lower level. The British maintained two embassies in Libya, at Benghazi and Tripoli, partly out of practicality. The main task of the embassies was to keep in touch with ministers of the government, who tended to move about the country on a triangular course between Tripoli, Benghazi and Beida, without prior announcement, often giving Embassy staff the impression that they were trying to avoid contact and decision making. Detailed knowledge of the movements of ministers was necessary if the work of the embassies was to be accomplished. Commercial work in Libya was therefore notoriously difficult to execute and this was compounded by understaffing and the almost byzantine complexities of negotiating with the monarchy.<sup>93</sup>

The same problems were encountered concerning oil development. Ivor Lucas, First Secretary and Head of Chancery in Tripoli claimed the Libyans had “quite clever people who were planning to spend a lot of the oil money on development and not just waste it on sophisticated weaponry” but “the machine really worked too slowly”. Tribal lands and intricate negotiations caused delays for the constructions of pipelines and led the BP General Manager John Haines, as reported by First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Tripoli, Ivor Lucas, to plead to King Idris: “Your Majesty, during the War II I was a prisoner in Tobruk, a prisoner of the Germans. I spent a great deal of time and effort trying to find ways of getting out of Tobruk. I never dreamed that, all these years later, I would be equally frustrated trying to find ways in again”. Apparently the King was so amused by this that obstacles for that particular project were lifted.<sup>94</sup>

Given economic developments in Britain and Libya by the summer of 1967 it is hardly surprising that British policy towards the Libyan withdrawal request showed a

---

<sup>93</sup> R W Munro, Inspector Diplomatic Service, report, December 1968, FCO 39/451.

<sup>94</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Interview with The Hon. Ivor Thomas Mark Lucas, 25th January 2005 , conducted by Malcolm McBain . Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Lucas.pdf> [ 22 January 2010], 19.

marked concern with trade. The critical issue raised by the withdrawal request was that total withdrawal would undermine Britain's treaty obligation under article two to defend Libya in the event of an attack, because it would remove the facilities essential to implementing the defence plan and so the treaty would become void. The treaty was considered by the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence to be of particular economic value because it enabled the British to maintain military missions, which were valuable for maintaining arms sales in the growing Libyan market. Furthermore, total withdrawal threatened the training rights the British enjoyed in the Libyan desert, which enabled them to work with the Libyan military and promote and provide after sales care for arms sales. The British Ambassador continued to stress his concerns that the Libyans had been reluctant to exercise over recent years and was eager to revitalise the military missions' engagement with the Libyan army.<sup>95</sup>

In June 1967 the Foreign Office's perception of British interests in Libya was that, whilst the training and staging facilities were of great value,

"what is of greater importance is that the treaty, the presence of British bases in Libya and the existence of a substantial Libyan market for our exports (which) must all be regarded as part of a whole. Without the treaty we could not expect Libya to look to Britain as she now does as a major source of imports".<sup>96</sup>

The assumption was that the military facilities were linked "with the preservation of our interests" and withdrawals by British forces would make it more difficult to sell British arms to Libyan forces. The military and naval missions "in practice act as promoters of these considerable sales" and "it seems therefore important to retain as much of the treaty and military agreement as serves our interests and to ensure the missions themselves remain".<sup>97</sup> Specifically, it was concluded that a termination of

---

<sup>95</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 1 September 1967, FCO 39/102.

<sup>96</sup> Memorandum, Libyan bases, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>97</sup> P Mallet to E M Rose, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/119.

Britain's treaty obligations would lead to loss of most, if not all arms exports to Libya and a sharp drop in other exports.<sup>98</sup> The Ministry of Defence also concurred with this interpretation: "withdrawal of British forces will inevitably make it more difficult to sell British arms to the Libyan forces" and abrogation of the treaty would jeopardise further arms sales.<sup>99</sup>

The Labour Government's pressing concern with Britain's economic predicament, overseas expenditure and the commitment to carrying out the 1966 Defence Review requirements meant ministers were initially eager to accede to the Libyans' demands for withdrawal but even this position was tempered by trade considerations. Whilst George Brown and Denis Healey had concluded that the Libyan request was an opportunity to get out of the treaty obligations, Healey thought it important that Britain should conduct themselves in as friendly a fashion as possible to the Libyans as he hoped "to continue our profitable sales to Libya estimated at £100 million pounds in military orders over the next four years".<sup>100</sup>

However ministers were to be influenced by the economic benefits associated with the deployments. The Foreign Office urged a sympathetic approach to Libyan concerns so that any withdrawals Britain made did "not unduly prejudice our real commercial interests".<sup>101</sup> Within the Ministry of Defence a report on the "Implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya" by the Defence Planning Staff in late June concluded that "a complete withdrawal of British and US forces would leave a vacuum in Libya" and the Soviet Union, Egypt and Algeria could exploit the commercial and economic situation with offers of arms and technicians and training missions. The Chiefs of Staff were content that a partial withdrawal to El Adem and Tobruk would

---

<sup>98</sup> D J Speares to E M Rose, 19 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>99</sup> Draft paper, MOD, 29 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>100</sup> D Maitland, Head of Foreign Office News Department to D J Speares, 19 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>101</sup> Memorandum, Libyan Bases, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

enable the British to maintain arms sales and training facilities but these would be lost with a total withdrawal. The link between the Anglo-Libyan treaty, British training rights, missions and trade was heavily emphasised in the report. Naval and military missions acted as export promoters, offering “unofficial after sales service”.<sup>102</sup> The Chiefs of Staff urged the strengthening of paragraphs in the report on the benefits of training and arms sales brought about through the military presence.<sup>103</sup>

When British policy on withdrawal was considered at DOPC on 28 July 1967 the memorandum presented by Foreign Secretary George Brown stressed trade considerations and opportunities for the British to sell arms to the Libyans. The paper accepted that the British should attempt to remain in El Adem, not only to keep the confidence of the King but to secure training rights and export preferences, whilst leaving the commitment unchanged. In order to preserve the regime and Britain's position it was suggested that Libya's integrity needed first to be safe-guarded by her own security forces , and that the requirement for British troops to protect Libya's frontier's was no longer realistic, thus opening the way for greater arms sales to strengthen the regime. Finally it was necessary to agree, if the Libyans wished, to retain the British military and naval missions in Libya which “played a valuable part in furthering arms sales”.<sup>104</sup>

Within Libya Brigadier A.R.E Davis head of the Benghazi military mission was actually frustrated by what he saw as slow progress in procuring arms sales. He believed the Libyans regarded the mission personnel as spies and would often behave pettily towards the British. Davis also felt the Libyan army was operational inefficient, the officers possessed of low morale and generally apathetic.<sup>105</sup> Ambassador Sarrell

---

<sup>102</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>103</sup> COS 51 mtg, 20 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>104</sup> OPD (67) 64, British Forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>105</sup> A R Davis to R Sarrell, 11 July 1967, FCO 39/102

considered Davis was “temperamentally ill suited to...cajoling the Libyan army into improving its low standard of efficiency”.<sup>106</sup> Davis reportedly insulted Arab sensibilities by riding around in a borrowed Libyan staff car with his dogs and “lolling back with his feet up”.<sup>107</sup> Davis was replaced later in the year when large arms sales were being secured.<sup>108</sup> His replacement, Brigadier Warren had an equally difficult posting. He was noted for his interference in matters beyond his military remit, his pedantic nature and his ability to upset Libyan colonels. The Libyan Minister of Defence Abaidi was particularly concerned by Warren’s “ill-judged political gossip” about the “British being good at training revolutionary officers”.<sup>109</sup>

Returning to the question of withdrawal, the events of June 1967, in Libya and the Arab world, also indicated that a limited withdrawal was of benefit to maintaining London’s economic interests in the country. The Ambassador concluded: “the internal political considerations in Libya and her relationship to the rest of the Arab world have now reached the point where we no longer gain, and indeed put at risk the valuable economic interest in the country by attempting to retain military forces in Libya at their current level”.<sup>110</sup>

In the event the British agreed to a withdrawal from Benghazi during August 1967. British troops remained at El Adem and Tobruk, military missions were maintained and as a result trading interests were consolidated. By the end of 1967 the British position in Libya was re-secured and trade was flourishing. The Foreign Office’s Libyan Annual Review suggested at the end of 1967 that:

---

<sup>106</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 29 July 1967, FCO 39/102

<sup>107</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 5 August 1967, FCO 39/102

<sup>108</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 2 September 1967, FCO 39/102

<sup>109</sup> PGA Wakefield to FO, 19 August 1968, FCO 39/103.

<sup>110</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 31 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

“We end the year with requests for advice, training and advisors higher than ever, with our prestige enhanced by the British resolution on the Middle East at the Security Council; with confidence in British consultants growing and their employment at a high level; with 100 British teachers working in Libya and many requests for additional staff; with arms orders signed”.<sup>111</sup>

Normal export trade was promising to rival 1965's figures. The annual review of Anglo-Libyan relations claimed that “the market for British goods and particularly services such as consultancy is excellent; the Libyans well disposed to us and the demand expanding”.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Libya: Annual Review for 1967, January 1968, FCO 39/344.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

### 4.3 Britain's Strategic Policy

Britain's commitment to an East of Suez defence role came under further pressure as financial hardship strained British capabilities during the late 1960s. The Labour Government continued to struggle with the economy and the balance of payments deficit, caused in part by high defence expenditure and subsequent attacks on sterling by investors. Wilson's Government had attempted to align foreign and defence commitments within tight budgetary constraints but by early 1967 economic problems persisted and unemployment rose. In March George Brown and Denis Healey stated that cuts in force levels and the maintenance of commitments were found to be untenable. The whole issue of Britain's global policy now came to the fore. In a Cabinet memorandum by Brown and Healey on the 31 of that month it was stated that "for the health of our economy we must change our overseas policies" with the focus being on reductions in South East Asia as well as the Mediterranean.<sup>113</sup>

The expensive East of Suez strategy was no longer economically viable for the Labour Government, simultaneously committed to NATO and maintaining an expensive independent nuclear deterrent whilst financing social welfare programmes promoted by the Left of the party.<sup>114</sup> Capabilities had been cut and now commitments were to be further reduced as British defence strategy moved from the traditional Empire and Commonwealth areas of interest to an emphasis on Western Europe and the Atlantic. The Defence Expenditure Studies report by the DOPC Official Committee, approved by ministers on 3 July 1967 stated that: "by the mid 1970s we shall have ceased to play a worldwide military role...we shall increasingly become a European

---

<sup>113</sup> Joint Cabinet memorandum, Defence Expenditure Studies, G Brown and D Healey, 31 March 1967, CAB 129/128/2.

<sup>114</sup> D. Sanders, *Losing an Empire Finding a Role, British Foreign Policy since 1945* (Basingstoke/New York, 1990), pp. 253-5.

power; and our international influence will depend more and more on the soundness of our economy, rather than on our maintenance of a military presence in the rest of the world".<sup>115</sup> The report suggested that the security of Britain would depend upon the prevention of war in Europe and the focus of British defence policy would be on contributing to NATO; this was particularly relevant as political and economic relations with Europe grew closer and the Wilson Government actively sought another application to the Common Market in late 1967. Europe offered Britain the chance to revitalise and reinvent itself. Alison Parr considers that the Labour Government believed an enlarged Europe, empowered by a strengthened technological base, would act as the platform for the exercise of Britain's power.<sup>116</sup> Hughes claims that Labour "back-benchers, both from the Left and the pro-EEC lobby regarded the "world role" as an unsustainable fantasy", while there was an influential lobby within the Foreign Office encouraging a more Eurocentric approach to external policy. Wilson and Healey displayed a greater interest in pursuing a European course for Britain after 1966 whilst George Brown had urged during the 1966 sterling crisis the withdrawal of troops from East of Suez. The appointment of Roy Jenkins as Chancellor in December 1967 played an important role in shifting British foreign and defence policy thereafter away from the East of Suez role.<sup>117</sup>

The "July Studies Report" concluded that Britain would have left Singapore, Malaysia and the Persian Gulf by the mid 1970s. Remaining "out of Europe" commitments would be strictly concerned with "discharging responsibilities to dependent territories", carrying out the limited commitments to SEATO and CENTO, meeting "moral obligations to Australia and New Zealand", and contributing to

---

<sup>115</sup> S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), p. 198.

<sup>116</sup> H. Parr, 'Britain America East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy, 1964-1967', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 415.

<sup>117</sup> G. Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (Ipswich/New York, 2009), pp. 106-107.

international peace-keeping and to other Allied operations in order to maintain “general Western interests”. It was accepted that Britain would have “gone a long way” towards renouncing its commitment to CENTO following a planned withdrawal from the Gulf States.<sup>118</sup> However DOPC members were emphatic about keeping the CENTO commitment to the defence of Iran because of the importance of oil supplies from there to Britain and the need to deter Soviet threats. This decision did not secure the strategic role of El Adem for CENTO, as El Adem was only of value to the CENTO route for shorter range transport aircraft and for certain contingency plans for Africa which needed to stage there.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore the Chiefs of Staff in June 1967 agreed that there was little strategic value in the facilities given the withdrawal from Aden and the continuation of the Sudanese restrictions.<sup>120</sup> The CENTO obligation meant the Cyprus bases would be retained and Britain would still retain some air and naval facilities in Malta, although the Maltese defence agreement would expire in 1974.

The Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy of 18 July 1967 “revised commitments and facility plans in the light of British policy to encourage indigenous developments to enable the withdrawal of British forces from the Far East and the Middle East”. The paper took into account political events, including those in the Middle East since the June 1967 crisis and economic concerns. There was now a “pressing need to reduce overseas expenditure” due to a “slower rate of growth “and “consequent necessity to keep government expenditure as low as possible”.<sup>121</sup> The statement acknowledged that the full East of Suez commitment was no longer tenable and provided for its scaling down.

---

<sup>118</sup> Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 194.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>120</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Policy Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, DP 51/67, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>121</sup> Supplementary Statement of Defence Policy 1967, Cmnd 3357 (London, 1967), 1-2.

As well as economic considerations, the events of the Six Day War had had implications for Britain's wider strategic policy as well as the significance of military facilities, including those in Libya. The War provided an illustration of Britain's Middle East impotence, as it was unable to keep the peace politically or militarily, despite expenditure on bases and infrastructure in the Mediterranean, Libya and the Gulf. British and Western policy, which aimed to maintain free production and transit of oil from the Arab world, had not been achieved. Military facilities appeared to serve little strategic purpose; a redundancy identified in other deployments in Aden, Simonstown and Singapore.<sup>122</sup> The value of facilities also appeared politically unsustainable given the depth of reaction to them, particularly in Libya. The riots in Benghazi and Tripoli, which Vandewalle claims were also an expression of popular frustration with the regime, emphasised the vulnerability of facilities as a focus of discontent not just against the ruling authorities but Western interference.<sup>123</sup> Bartlett states that the Six Day War demonstrated the irrelevance of British forces either in the context of the defence of specific British interests, such as an assured flow of oil, or the exercise of British influence in the crisis.<sup>124</sup> By the 1960s there were also "growing doubts ...whether force was still relevant to the defence of economic interests" and it became a widely held view that military facilities had become outdated and anachronistic.<sup>125</sup> Michael Dockrill points out that the Six Day War undermined the usefulness of Britain's overseas role as a means of defending her commercial ties.<sup>126</sup> Frankel notes "as the military bases turned from assets into liabilities, so the essential advantageous pragmatic traditions of the past became increasingly detrimental to sound policies in a

---

<sup>122</sup> Sanders, *Losing An Empire*, p. 231.

<sup>123</sup> D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>124</sup> C. Bartlett, 'The Military Instrument in British Foreign Policy', in J. Bayliss (ed.), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World*, (London, 1977), p. 44.

<sup>125</sup> P. Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke/New York, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>126</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford, 1988), p. 94.

rapidly deteriorating power position which made clarity of purpose and definition of priorities more and more imperative".<sup>127</sup>

At DOPC towards the end of June and Cabinet on 6 July 1967, it was pointed out that the Six Day War had shown Britain's military presence had not played "any worthwhile role in a critical situation". It was an "embarrassment" to Britain's friends in the Middle East and "harmful" to Britain's political and oil interests.<sup>128</sup> An attempt at military intervention, in the form of an "Anglo-American joint maritime force for action" to keep open the straits of Tiran failed to come to fruition, partly due to opposition in the Cabinet as well as from the Chiefs of Staff who stressed the impracticality of the plan. Furthermore the United States, tied down by a military commitment in Vietnam, were unwilling to become involved in a military venture and they urged the British to take the lead. Crossman, Leader of the House of Commons and Healey considered such action would leave Britain isolated and "classed as a Western imperialist trying to vainly to reassert (British suzerainty) when (they) hadn't the military force to do so".<sup>129</sup>

The realisation that Britain had little political or diplomatic influence during the crisis fed into a perceived decline in Britain's role in the Middle East. Crossman noted in his diaries, for 13 June 1967: "the net effect of this tremendous Israeli victory has been to expose British impotence".<sup>130</sup> The Six Day War was "a salutary lesson, not because they were involved but because they were not" and the war high-lighted Britain's vulnerability to oil supply control by the Arab states.<sup>131</sup> As a consequence, Barbara

---

<sup>127</sup> J. Frankel, *British Foreign Policy 1945-1973* (London, 1975), pp. 129-130.

<sup>128</sup> OPD (67) 23 and 24 mtgs, 15 and 26 June 1967, CAB 148/30, CC 45 mtg, 6 July 1967, CAB 128/42.

<sup>129</sup> R. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol. 2* (London, 1976), p. 358.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>131</sup> J.W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International policy* (Manchester, 2003), p. 105. J. K. Wright in "The decision to withdraw from East of Suez", Seminar held 16 November 1990, (Institute of Contemporary

Castle, Minister of State for Transport at that time, noted in her diary for the 8 June, London's immediate priority was "to mend out relations with the Arab States".<sup>132</sup>

Whilst the strategic usefulness of the Libyan bases had withered and Britain's political and diplomatic position in the Arab world appeared to have diminished, there remained strategic concerns in Whitehall over who would replace Britain's position as defence policy moved to a focus on Europe and NATO. Foreign and defence policy planning now became concerned with preventing vacuums in territories vacated by British troops. In Aden the British tried to secure the continued rule of Sheiks and a concern with exposing Libya to intervention from the Soviet Union and Egypt influenced British policy in Libya during the withdrawal request. Frankel recognises this as a policy focus during Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971.<sup>133</sup>

In June 1967 the Defence Planning Staff suggested that a withdrawal from Libya, resulting in the end of defence arrangements, would leave the country isolated in North Africa, surrounded by nationalist regimes in Algeria, Egypt and the Sudan who, with Soviet support, would seek to fill this "vacuum". The Defence Planning Staff considered that the Soviet Union and Egypt would attempt to ingratiate themselves with offers of arms, technicians and training missions and threaten the internal security of the Idris regime, so altering the strategic balance in the Mediterranean against the West. It was concluded that "we consider that the preservation of a friendly and stable Libya is in the Western interest in so far as this can be achieved".<sup>134</sup> However to

---

History, 2002. Available from <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/witness/esuez/>), 20. The value of the Middle Eastern oil supply was diminishing in the 1960s as Alaskan and British oil fields were increasingly exploited. This made the argument that the UK was reliant on Middle Eastern oil difficult to maintain.

<sup>132</sup> B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-1976* (London, 1990), p.133.

<sup>133</sup> J. Frankel, *British Foreign Policy*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>134</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff, The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

continue to maintain a military presence was against the Government's 1966 Defence Review statement and as we have seen, threatened Britain's other interests in the country. Ambassador Sarrell counselled, "the internal political considerations in Libya and her relationship to the rest of the Arab world have now reached the point where we no longer gain, and indeed put at risk the increasingly valuable economic interest in the country by attempting to retain military forces in Libya at their current level".<sup>135</sup> British officials had to balance a military withdrawal and the threat from Egypt and the Soviet Union with a need to maintain their position in Libya.

Relations with Egypt remained frosty, not least as a result of the British presence in Libya which was a target for Nasser's propaganda and rhetoric against the West. Moreover as Morgan has identified, "the Foreign Office, for all its traditional pro-Arabism, found itself out of touch with Cairo, diplomatic relations having been broken off over Rhodesia".<sup>136</sup> Caution had been urged by Foreign Secretary Brown, prior to the Six Day War, regarding Britain's approach to Egypt. He believed London "must not fall into the trap of regarding...our Middle Eastern policy as a struggle to the death between ourselves and President Nasser.....we are not setting out to...topple Nasser...but neither are we prepared to accept that he has the right to topple another Middle Eastern nation at the risk of plunging us all into war".<sup>137</sup>

Yet Egyptian propaganda continued to fuel Arab Nationalist discontent towards the West, primarily by propagating the "Big Lie" which undermined British and Western influence. The "Big Lie" involved Egyptian media allegations that the United States and Britain participated in Israel's pre-emptive attack on Egypt and Syria. According to Radio Cairo, United States and British aircraft carriers provided an air umbrella for Israel and played an active role in the operations including United States aircraft flying

---

<sup>135</sup> Ambassador's Despatch, 8 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>136</sup> A. Morgan, *Harold Wilson, A Life* (London, 1992), p. 304.

<sup>137</sup> Hansard, 747, HOC, Col. 110, 31 May 1967.

from the Libyan Wheelus base.<sup>138</sup> According to Michael Oren the Egyptians used the “Big Lie” in an attempt to secure direct Soviet assistance and to reverse an Israeli victory achieved with Western support.<sup>139</sup> The allegations had an immediate political impact leading to Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, and the Republic of Yemen severing diplomatic relations with the United States and Britain. The oil embargo and anti-Western protests in the Middle East were also products of the “Big Lie”. Even after the war the collusion story continued despite official British and American denials. Brown sent a personal letter to all Arab ambassadors in London, in which he ridiculed Cairo's allegations but it was obvious that as the British representative to the UN claimed: “The Arabs do not want to believe our denials”.<sup>140</sup>

Britain's position in the Middle East would require a new strategy as they sought to re-secure relations with the Arab nations whilst maintaining their support for Israel. Moshe Gat claims the Israeli victory had clearly delivered a colossal blow to British interests.<sup>141</sup> The British looked for ways to defend the national priorities of “securing a cheap and regular supply of oil, obtaining a large and profitable share of the Middle East oil industry, encouraging ample Arab investment in Britain, and securing for British exports a bigger slice of the regional market”. Gat recognises that the Foreign Office continued to emphasise the “urgent need to block the Soviet Union's advance in the region, denying it control of the Arab Middle East and its resources”.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup> E. Podesh, Winter 2004, ‘The Lie That Won't Die: Collusion 1967’, *The Middle East Quarterly*, (11,1). Available from <http://www.meforum.org/587/the-lie-that-wont-die-collusion-1967> [2 May 2010].

<sup>139</sup> M. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford, 2002), p. 217.

<sup>140</sup> The Lord Caradon, Minister of State, to FO, 8 June 1967, FCO 17/598.

<sup>141</sup> M. Gat, ‘Britain and Israel Before and After the Six Day War, June 1967: From Support to Hostility’, *Contemporary British History*, 18 (2004), 61.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

George Brown also stressed the Soviet threat to British and Western interests in a memorandum presented to Cabinet in early July 1967. Brown feared Soviet “erosion of Western influence, including the economic interests of the United States and Britain”.<sup>143</sup> A new strategy was to be implemented with a “twin-track policy, which would ... seek to promote a general settlement between Israel and the Arabs, and improve Britain’s own dismal relationship with the Arab world”.<sup>144</sup> Despite this many Labour MP’s had pro-Israeli sympathies including Wilson, whom Abba Eban, Israel’s Foreign Minister from 1966 to 1974, claims was Israel’s closest friend in Europe.<sup>145</sup> In contrast George Brown had greater Arab sympathies. Brown believed that if Britain wanted to maintain its interests in the Middle East, it had to do more than simply distance itself from Israeli policy. It had to take positive action and establish, as soon as possible, a good working relationship with the Arab states as well.<sup>146</sup>

Connections between events in Libya and the wider affairs of the Arab world could not be ignored. A limited withdrawal enabled the British to combine a policy that maintained a British presence and a pro-Western regime, thus thwarting Soviet and Egyptian interests in the country. A limited withdrawal also placated Arab criticism to some degree in both Libya and the Middle East of Britain’s role during June and the military presence in the region. The easing of Arab hostility towards London would also allow the British to re-secure oil and trade ties and calm political tensions in conservative Arab states if the British were seen to be responding to Arab demands, so undermining political opposition in those countries. In a July 1967 DOPC memorandum on “British Forces in Libya”, authored by the Foreign Secretary, the withdrawal request was considered in strategic terms. The memorandum stated that a withdrawal would give aid and comfort to pro-Egyptian extremist elements, possibly encouraging a revolution or revolt against the monarchy. In keeping with current

---

<sup>143</sup> C (67) 123, 7 July 1967, CAB 129/132.

<sup>144</sup> Gat, ‘Britain and Israel Before and After the Six Day War’, 61.

<sup>145</sup> A. Morgan, *Harold Wilson*, p. 309.

<sup>146</sup> Gat, ‘Britain and Israel Before and After the Six Day War’, 63.

thinking, it was suggested that such an event could well lead to the collapse of other moderate regimes in Tunisia and Morocco. To remain and “retain a presence in Libya sufficient to avoid loss of confidence on the part of the Libyan monarchy” would avoid the risk of giving a stimulus to the “revolutionary” elements in the Middle East who had suffered some humiliation in Nasser’s defeat at the hands of Israel. The Foreign Office was particularly keen not to allow Nasser a “political and military” success in Libya as a result.<sup>147</sup> At DOPC on 28 July 1967 there was general agreement with the Foreign Secretary’s memorandum.<sup>148</sup> However British officials would face criticism from Washington over policy towards Libya and its likely effects on greater US strategic interests.

British policy contrasted with the American approach to the withdrawal request and served to highlight British commitment to withdrawal from East of Suez. The Libyan request had raised concerns in Washington and the Johnson administration was not willing to forego strategic interests in the region which could undermine its overall strategic policy. The administration therefore took seriously any attempt by the Libyans or the British to revise existing arrangements. Instead Washington interpreted the request to leave Wheelus as a natural development of the 1964 events and was not keen to tie the issue to the events of 1967; hoping to draw out the discussions until “the heat of the present crisis subsided”.<sup>149</sup> At Cabinet on 6 July Wilson noted that he had received a telegram from President Johnson asking the British “to go slow on defence cuts East of Suez”.<sup>150</sup>

Washington was eager to work with the British on the withdrawal request. The State Department aimed to consult the British “fully before making any decisions on withdrawal from the Wheelus airbase and to keep as closely in step with the UK as

---

<sup>147</sup> OPD (67) 64, British forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

<sup>148</sup> OPD (67) 28 mtg, 28 July 1967, CAB 148/30.

<sup>149</sup> P Mallet to FO, 20 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>150</sup> Castle, *The Castle Diaries*, p.137.

possible".<sup>151</sup> The Ministry of Defence advised that "it is important that we should co-ordinate our policy and our tactics" although policy was committed to the Benghazi withdrawal and it was expected that there would be "strong US representations against our making any moves at all from Cyrenaica".<sup>152</sup> In June Ambassador Sarrell pointed out that to keep Benghazi "would not bolster the US position at Wheelus and would merely incur odium we can ill risk without any resultant benefit" from the Libyans. Sarrell suggested that there were "sound reasons" for not aligning with Washington on the bases issue because the Libyans wanted the British to take an independent line. He emphasised the problem with the Wheelus base, which he considered was unpopular with the Libyans because it was noisy and near to Tripoli. Additionally he believed that the Libyans were suspicious of Washington's good faith.<sup>153</sup> Later in July Sarrell added that Washington had asked the British not to take the withdrawal demand at face value and he believed that the United States prized the training grounds above relations with the Libyans. Sarrell felt that Washington would consider a British withdrawal, not just as a defence reduction but as a strategic retreat. He concluded that it would be interpreted as "the removal of a bastion against Russian military penetration into Libya and North Africa and so the Mediterranean".<sup>154</sup> Fraser has recognised that prior to the events of the Six Day War the United States had interests elsewhere, including Berlin, Cuba and Vietnam but the "peace which seemed to have settled" over the region "was an illusion" and Washington was now drawn to focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the threats to Western interests as a result of the Six Day War.<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> P Dean to FO, 21 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>152</sup> Draft paper, MOD, 29 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>153</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 30 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>154</sup> Ambassador's Despatch, 8 July 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>155</sup> T.G. Fraser, *The USA and the Middle East Since World War 2* (London, 1989), p.77.

On 27 June 1967 Eugene Rostow, the US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs urged that Britain and the USA “should take a firm stand against any withdrawal”. Rostow specifically did not want a withdrawal from Benghazi and hoped that Britain and “the US would work together to stiffen the King and to reassure him of our support and of our intention not to do any deal with Nasser behind the backs of the moderate Arabs”. Rostow enquired about possible support from the British and Saudi monarchies and stated that US oil companies were prepared to help. He did not want Washington appearing to back down in the face of Nationalist pressure, offering only the removal of some obsolete oil tanks at Wheelus to placate the Libyans.<sup>156</sup> The Foreign Office was “frankly rather shocked at the lack of realism which was revealed by Rostow’s comments” and warned that “at the official level at least, we do not share his views”.<sup>157</sup>

British policy was now tailored specifically to reducing costly commitments, assuaging Libyan and Arab criticism and pursuing a withdrawal from a global defence strategy, despite American protestations. The British record in Libya mirrored the independent and determined approach the British adopted towards the Aden withdrawal. Simon Smith observes that the British withdrawal from Aden showed that “Britain was capable of pursuing an independent policy in accordance with the perceived national interests” and the same was true despite protestations from Washington about withdrawal from Libya.<sup>158</sup> In Libya the Labour Government was determined to reduce commitments whatever Washington’s attitude and on 29 June Rostow appeared to accept that it was no good trying to maintain bases against the wishes of the Libyans and agreed to provide assistance in internal security to bolster

---

<sup>156</sup> P Dean to FO, 27 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>157</sup> FO to Washington, 28 June 1967, FCO 39/118, E M Rose to FO, 26 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>158</sup> S. C. Smith, ‘Revolution and reaction: South Arabia in the aftermath of the Yemeni revolution’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28 (2000), 205.

the regime.<sup>159</sup> This complemented British policy that was aimed at strengthening “the hands of our friends, especially the King” by helping the Libyans to “to bend before the wind of Arab Nationalism” through social and economic development and building up the security forces.<sup>160</sup>

However the strategic threat to the stability of the area was further emphasised by Eugene Rostow on 10 August during talks with Ambassador Patrick Dean in Washington. Rostow pushed for a continued British presence in Libya and talked with emphasis “about Libyan vulnerability to subversion and the effects on the Western position in the Mediterranean and on oil supplies of its loss and considered that the domino theory applied in this area and if Libya went, Morocco and Tunisia would also”. The US urged the need for a strong “clear position of deterrence...as subversion once it started was hard to stop” and “withdrawal would be an open invitation to Nasser”.<sup>161</sup> Ambassador Sarrell agreed with Washington’s interpretation of the situation in Libya and North Africa “but I do not believe the presence of foreign troops in Libya is in itself an effective weapon of deterrence”.<sup>162</sup>

Washington continued to express concerns for the security of the region during Anglo-American talks in September 1967. These talks were focused on the Maghreb but the situation in Libya was discussed on 14 September, the Americans evidencing a strong interest in securing the Libyan regime through development. Rostow believed Libya to be one of the most sensitive and dangerous points in the region, ripe for attempts at a takeover, in the next year, citing threats from Algeria and Egypt. He believed London and Washington should take “a crisp clear posture” on the country and show their commitment through a military presence. The British delegation, headed by Denis Allen, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, still

---

<sup>159</sup> P Dean to FO, 29 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>160</sup> FO to Washington, 28 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>161</sup> Washington to FO, 10 August 1967, DEFE 11/706.

<sup>162</sup> Tripoli to FO, 14 August 1967, DEFE 11/706.

believed that political and security issues needed to be addressed especially as the June crisis “revealed serious deficiencies in the Libyan internal security forces and the capacity of Egypt to stir up trouble” and “the problem remained of getting the Libyans to focus on the problem of their younger generation”. The Americans concurred with the idea of “moving Libyan society forward” through a process of political development and that provision of experts to train the security forces should have the highest priority.<sup>163</sup>

Looking at the wider strategic concerns associated with Libya, Washington considered that the country, with British involvement, still had a role in global defence strategy. Rostow repeated “the main theme” which he had made in all discussions that Washington’s concern was to protect the capacity of the United States to function in world affairs. Rostow stated that the United States and Britain were in a stronger position when they were acting collectively and the main problem was to organise an environment in which the United States could exercise its responsibilities “without hindrance from the rear, ” emphasising London’s role in US global strategy. Allen stressed that helping Libya “partly depended upon our future resources and priorities” and was “a job for Anglo-US partnership”.<sup>164</sup>

Anglo-American relations and the withdrawal request of 1967 illustrated Britain’s evolving strategic policy agenda. Whilst the British were not oblivious to global strategic issues and security, particularly in the Middle East, their policy now appeared to recognise that facilities were politically and strategically anachronistic and counter-productive to British interests. London, restricted by cost and an evolving philosophical approach to facilities now determined that the strategic concerns of the West and Britain lay in securing the Libyan regime internally, by building an effective security

---

<sup>163</sup> Record of Anglo-US talks, 14 September 1967, DEFE 11/706.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, Rostow stated that if the British pulled out of Germany it would be impossible for the US to remain indicating that when both worked together there was no difficulty.

force, developing the country and maintaining the minimum base areas until 1973, rather than maintaining extensive deployments. British policy on Libya at this time reinforces Simon Smith's assertion that Britain was "prepared to adopt policies in defiance of Washington" in the Middle East.<sup>165</sup>

By the end of 1967 the British had secured their remaining military presence in Libya. They had also begun the process of reinforcing the pro-Western government of King Idris which in turn would enable the securing of economic and political ties in the wider region, both for Britain and the West, against a perceived strategic threat from Nasser and the Soviet Union. A Foreign Office report stated that "1967 had been a tumultuous year for Britain in Libya" and drew the conclusion that "we as British have many friends and great influence remaining in Libya but that as foreigners, and as supposed pro-Israelis we are liable to incur the hostility of the Libyan man in the street".<sup>166</sup>

However, an interesting interpretation of the political and military situation in 1967 came from the British Ambassador, Roderick Sarrell. Whilst the Foreign Office and MOD remained committed to the treaty and advised the Government accordingly, the Six Day War and the reaction in Libya had a profound effect on the Ambassador's view of Britain's position in the country. This caused him to question, in July 1967, the assumptions that underlay Britain's defence commitment, as well as Britain's military capacity in the 1960s given the changed strategic environment. He stressed that: "the incontrovertible fact is that the nature of the threat to Libya's integrity and the political position of Libya, as well as Britain's capacity for independent military action outside colonial territories, have radically altered since the treaty was drawn up fourteen years ago and our ability to do so in the modern world in defence of Libya seems to merit fresh political study". Ambassador Sarrell further questioned the military sense of the

---

<sup>165</sup> S. C. Smith, 'Power Transferred? Britain, the United States and the Gulf, 1956-1971', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 3.

<sup>166</sup> R A Kealey, 8 January 1968, FCO 39/344.

commitment to defend against Algeria and Egypt and whether it was even politically feasible. He believed the treaty commitment, “phoney”, given the Libyan’s perception of a rising Algerian threat.<sup>167</sup>

The Foreign Office gave these considerations some thought over the next six months, focusing mainly upon whether it was politically acceptable for Britain to intervene in the region and, although the Ambassador never received the conclusions because the response was delayed, they do help us to understand the Foreign Office’s perception of Britain’s position in the region as well as the seriousness of the perceived threat to Libya. It was concluded that Britain could still intervene in Libya with great power “acquiescence”. Limits on Britain’s role were for “military and economic, not political, reasons”. There appeared to be little chance of unprovoked Egyptian and Algerian attack but there was the possibility of Algerian or Egyptian intervention in support of a revolution. Any British intervention would require Washington’s cooperation and would not be entirely free of Arab criticism. The Foreign Office believed that the commitment was not “phoney”, as the Ambassador had described it, given that the commitment would make the Egyptians and Algerians pause for thought, aware that Washington would support Britain and Libya. The Foreign Office concluded that the commitment could not be considered artificial in terms of British interests, “because the King wants it we could not extract ourselves from it without damage to our interest”.<sup>168</sup>

Furthermore Britain’s standing in the Middle East had improved greatly over the final six months of 1967. This was in part due to the defeat of Egypt in the Six Day War. Dawisha notes that the war was a significant moment in the history of Arab Nationalism. In June 1967 Arabs lost the concept of unification. Nasser’s position was

---

<sup>167</sup> Ambassador’s despatch, no 17, 8 July 1967, quoted in D J Speares to Ambassador in Tripoli, suspended draft letter, January 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>168</sup> D J Speares to Ambassador in Tripoli, suspended draft letter, January 1968, FCO 39/121.

irretrievably weakened as Cairo became reliant economically on oil rich Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Libya who granted \$280 million to compensate it for loss of land and revenue as a result of the defeat. Indeed the political focus now moved from Cairo to these conservative states and Dawisha notes that the Khartoum summit signified that these states would lead on inter-Arab politics rather than Nasser.<sup>169</sup> Little claims Israel's sweeping victory had "finally exposed the bankruptcy of Arab Revolutionary Nationalism".<sup>170</sup> As a result of his diminished political and military position Nasser had begun to tone down his anti-Western attacks and take a less bellicose stance towards Britain and the United States, so lessening criticism of the West.<sup>171</sup>

Britain's position in the Middle East also improved because London actively sought to rebuild relations in the Middle East. McNamara claims Britain found new "acceptance from Nasser and other Arab states" as a result of diplomatic actions at the UN in the drafting of Security Council Resolution 242 on 22 November 1967. Brenchley considers that Foreign Secretary George Brown managed to undermine much of the bad feeling of the "Big Lie" with his speech at the 5th Emergency Session of the UN General Assembly in June 1967, calling for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and taking a personal initiative to suggest to Nasser the restoration of diplomatic relations. Brown left Britain's standing in the Middle East "considerably higher on his resignation" on 15 March 1968 after the last of a long line of personal and political confrontations with the Prime Minister.<sup>172</sup> Arab appreciation of Britain's role had benefits in trade, notably in arms, to Arab states, amounting to

---

<sup>169</sup> A. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2003), pp. 252-256

<sup>170</sup> D. Little, *American Orientalism, The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (London, 2008), p.188.

<sup>171</sup> R. McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, 1952-1967* (London, 2003), p.273.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p.279. F. Brenchley, *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* (London, 2005), pp. 124,127.

£7.5 million to Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and Syria in 1967.<sup>173</sup> However, whilst McNamara notes that by the end of 1967 a long term shift in British strategy of opposing Nasser had come to an end, Egypt was still considered a political threat to Libya and British and Western strategic interests in the Arab world.<sup>174</sup> Supplementing Egyptian power and posing their own significant threat to Western strategic concerns was an evolving Soviet involvement in the region, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

---

<sup>173</sup> Thorpe, 'The Forgotten Shortage', 214.

<sup>174</sup> McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power*, p. 273, Brenchley, *Britain, the Six Day War*, p. 283.

## 4.4 Conclusion

Following the 1967 withdrawal request British policy aimed to rebuild the Anglo-Libyan political relationship, secure the remaining facilities and preserve economic interests, training facilities and the strategic orientation of the regime to the West, whilst remaining able to service the defence obligation. The 1967 withdrawal request was essentially a political statement used by the Idris regime to assuage Arab nationalist and internal criticism. The British and Libyans were able to pass off the negotiations as a response to the withdrawal request, although London had planned for the Benghazi withdrawal in the 1966 Defence Review. Both sides were determined to maintain the treaty and the facilities and despite the Labour Government's commitment to withdrawal, the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence steered the Government to compromise on a complete withdrawal, aware that the facilities had added benefits for London. A reinterpretation of the treaty, to maintain British interests should the treaty be undermined by a complete withdrawal, was even considered by the Foreign Office.

By the end of 1967 Britain's position in Libya was secured and the Foreign Office, along with the Ministry of Defence, was instrumental in promoting a continued political and military involvement in the country. However, London would retain the defence obligation outlined in the treaty, until at least 1973 and this necessitated continued expense. The Libyans were happy to continue the treaty relationship and hold on to British military support as a security guarantee against an Algerian and Egyptian threat. Whilst the events of June 1967 caused the British Ambassador in Libya to call for a rethink of the military and political thinking behind the treaty, the Foreign Office believed these assumptions underpinning the defence obligation were sound.

Wider British strategic priorities during this period continued to shift away from a defence and foreign policy commitment East of Suez to one based around NATO and Europe. The value of the Libyan military deployments to British strategy was already minimal. Officials recognised that the over-flight route through the Sudan was unlikely to be reopened, and the withdrawal from Aden in November 1967 ended the value of El Adem as an East of Suez staging post. The facilities yielded only limited staging and overflying functions. The Chiefs of Staff considered there was little strategic value in the facilities.<sup>175</sup> Officials had finally accepted the strategic limitations relating to Libyan deployments, although there appeared to have been a lapse in recognising these facts, or at least a reluctance to accept them until 1967 when circumstances, such as the British economic environment and a commitment to reducing expenditure provided a reason to disengage. The reluctance of Washington to countenance British disengagement from Libya show how far London's strategic priorities had shifted and how far the Labour Government was committed to these changes.

The Six Day War also had consequences for Britain's military presence in Libya and further afield, underlining the vulnerability and obsolescence of maintaining forces in other countries. However, officials considered that total withdrawal from Libya had the potential to create a strategic vacuum in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, a region of importance to British and Western strategic interests, which the USSR and Egypt would seek to exploit. The Libyans themselves remained anxious of Algerian and Egyptian intentions. A limited withdrawal served to not only maintain the British stake in Libya but restore those in the Middle East, where Britain's position and the West's on the Arab-Israeli conflict was widely criticised.

Despite the immediate effects of the war, Britain's economic involvement in Libya continued to grow and the relationship was of great value to this development. The Foreign Office recognised that the treaty, facilities and Libyan market were interlinked

---

<sup>175</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Planning Staff , The implications of the liquidation of UK bases in Libya, DP 51/67 , 21 June 1967, DEFE 24/313.

and without the treaty the Libyans would not look to London so willingly for trade. A continued military presence therefore helped preserve British economic interests. The MOD concurred with this appreciation of the relationship whilst emphasising the importance of the training facilities to British defence. The Labour Government accepted this appreciation of Britain's position in Libya.

The Wilson Government had been instrumental in reviewing strategic priorities and the attitude of ministers to the 1967 Libyan withdrawal request showed they were committed to reducing costs as global strategic commitments were shrunk. Initially the Government had hoped to take the opportunity to withdraw from all the facilities, given the need to reduce costs. The Foreign Office tempered the Labour Government's approach recognising that British priorities lay with the Idris regime and that maintaining some facilities was vital. As a consequence the Anglo-Libyan relationship was reaffirmed and during 1968 would grow considerably stronger.

## 5 Twilight of Relations 1968 -1969

With Anglo-Libyan relations stabilised after the 1967 War, London sought to develop national interests in Libya. Britain's commitment to the treaty was reaffirmed in May 1968 and the remaining facilities were secured until 1973 to service the defence commitment. These comprised an infantry company at Tobruk, the El Adem staging post with an armoured car squadron and the military missions. As the Labour Government continued to battle with the domestic economy, further cuts were made in the defence budget. In January 1968 Libya's wider strategic purpose East of Suez was formally ended with the Labour Government's decision to withdraw from that theatre of operations. This led to an increase in the training importance of the Libyan facilities as troops were redeployed closer to Britain. Britain's defence strategy was now firmly aligned to NATO and the perceived strategic threat in the eastern Mediterranean from the Soviet Union and Egypt emphasised how important it was for London to maintain a political commitment to Libya. The Libyans continued to stress the military threat from Algeria and Egypt whilst seeking to play a greater economic and political role in the Mediterranean. Whitehall considered Tripoli's political and economic development necessary to maintain British and Western interests not only in Libya but across the region.

Specifically, British policy in Libya aimed to secure the stability and future of the Idris regime by encouraging reform of the internal security apparatus, building up the military forces of Libya to a point where Libya could defend itself and sponsoring the economic development of the country. London focused upon promoting arms sales and reforming the Libyan army, which had reciprocal trade benefits for the British economy. Domestic opposition to the regime which had reached its zenith during the Six Day War had been dampened by the Libyan Government's pledging of funds to help Egypt and Jordan rebuild their shattered military forces. Libya promised \$84 million a year "until the traces of Israeli aggression are removed" along with

agreement to close the Benghazi garrison.<sup>1</sup> The Libyan monarchy also sought to stabilise society by addressing the social changes and disparities in wealth that oil revenue had brought to the country. Renewed confidence in the regime “was apparently completed by the appointment of Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush in October 1967, who “had the ideals and background, to understand and sympathise with the post independence generation of young Libyans”. He initiated ministerial committees with representatives of the universities on them to “encourage national consciousness” and hoped to encourage greater citizen participation in society. However he also took the opportunity to put on trial 106 people on charges of plotting against the government over the previous seven years including during the 1967 oil industry strike, although sentences were light.<sup>2</sup> The King and his government were disturbed enough by the events of June to spend large sums of oil revenue on bolstering their domestic security forces as well as those of the army.

Despite a surface calm in domestic political and social affairs the future of the Libyan monarchy was seriously compromised. Simons considers that whilst “much of the opposition to the monarchy had been crushed” the “weakness of the traditional power structure had been exposed”.<sup>3</sup> This weakness was attributable to the role Idris had played. Owen recognises that the King had confined the succession to his brothers and members of his own line and deprived the remainder of the royal family of their royal titles and of the right to hold public office, so alienating many from contributing to Libya’s development. Whilst a popular figure, he had little enthusiasm in reinforcing his legitimacy or “reminding his subjects of his authority by endless public performance”. He failed to maintain personal control over the army which he distrusted and he presided over a clique of close relatives and advisors strongly

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Wright, *Libya a Modern History* (London, 1981), p.104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>3</sup> G. Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke/London, 1993), p.150.

tainted by accusations of corruption and nepotism.<sup>4</sup> As Simons notes “the mass of Libyan people were receiving disproportionately few benefits” of the enormous oil wealth generated which ended up in “the pockets of a privileged Libyan elite”.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other Arab leaders such as the al-Sabahs in Kuwait, who avoided a “suffocatingly close relationship with the protecting power” Idris allowed himself to become too closely “associated with imperial Britain”.<sup>6</sup> The King “showed little skill in distancing himself from the British and the Americans” and by 1967 Roger Owen considers “his support had crumbled away beyond repair”. The link between the Monarchy and the West, embodied in the military deployments, were a focus for anti government protests and violence in June 1967. Essentially Idris “delegitimized” both himself and the whole system of monarchical rule.<sup>7</sup> Wright notes that it was considered unlikely that the Crown Prince would be allowed to succeed, at least “not without a struggle”. The Prince had not been allowed to perform his political duties but the King would also not allow him to resign his position.<sup>8</sup>

Given that popular domestic opposition had been countered by repressive legislation on political movements and mollified by action on the foreign bases and the introduction of a more amenable government, it was most likely that opposition would come from the military. Owen considers it was only timing and luck which determined which group of many would launch the first coup.<sup>9</sup> Vandewalle states that the West and the Middle East considered the army and particularly senior military figures were always the most likely to lead any revolt against the King.<sup>10</sup> Defence Secretary Denis

---

<sup>4</sup> R. Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the making of the modern Middle East* (London/New York,2008), p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p.156.

<sup>6</sup> S. C. Smith, *Kuwait 1950-1965, Britain, the al-Sabah and Oil* (Oxford,1999), p.142.

<sup>7</sup> Owen, *State, Power and Politics*, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.114.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, *State, Power and Politics*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 78.

Healey remarked later, that “it was obvious that the monarchy was likely to fall at any moment to an army coup”. Healey believed the influential Shelhi family would most likely attempt to overthrow the monarchy.<sup>11</sup> Indeed Colonel Abd-al-Aziz Shelhi had become Chief of Staff of the Libyan Army in just one move by the family to consolidate power. In April 1969 his eldest brother, Omar took on the role as the royal counsellor and consolidated his position by marrying the daughter of a former Prime Minister in an “ostentatious ceremony that only served to confirm popular ideas about the easily acquired wealth of the country’s leaders”.<sup>12</sup> However the revolution would be led by younger officers, brought up on Arab Nationalist rhetoric and teachings, who held a disdain for a regime that allowed the continued presence of foreign bases that compromised Libya’s independence.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> D. Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1991), p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.114.

<sup>13</sup> Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, p. 78.

## 5.1 Rebuilding the Relationship

From 1968 to 1969 the British nurtured and developed political interests in Libya, maintained the existing defence responsibilities and furthered economic ties through the remaining facilities. Mangold has recognised there was a temptation, during the 1960s, to hold on to military deployments, possibly because they “represented the last, as well as the most powerful, element of the British imperial presence”.<sup>14</sup> In Libya the facilities and the treaty remained valuable as symbols of the strength of the Anglo-Libyan relationship.

The treaty remained the bedrock of the relationship. A DOPC Defence Review Working Party note of 25 March 1968 stated that abandoning the treaty or removing the garrison would have political repercussions as it would “antagonise the present Libyan Government and any government likely to take its place in the short and medium term” and “we should lose the confidence of the King”. As a result oil and investment concerns would suffer. Secondly, if the British military presence in the Tobruk and El Adem area were withdrawn then training facilities would be lost, based as they were on close liaison between the army and Libyan authorities. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, the two offices being merged in 1968), argued “that it is overwhelmingly in our interest to maintain our support for the treaty until its first possible expiry date of December 1973” and in “present circumstances any attempt on our part to cancel or modify before then our commitment to come to Libya’s defence under the treaty would have serious financial and political consequences”. The FCO further counselled that no attempt should be made to abrogate the Anglo Libyan treaty

---

<sup>14</sup> P. Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy*, (Basingstoke/New York, 2001), p. 44.

unilaterally or withdraw remaining forces from Libya before the expiry date and this policy was endorsed by ministers in May 1968.<sup>15</sup>

However, to maintain Britain's interests it was considered vital to secure the Libyan monarchy. The British had not been averse to intervening militarily to prop up friendly governments, as had happened in Jordan in 1958 and Kuwait in 1961, and London had been instrumental in organising coups in the Emirates during the 1960s to install their preferred candidates.<sup>16</sup> But by the late 1960s such intervention in Libya was not to be entertained. Instead "a major effort to encourage the King and the Libyan Government to tackle the problems of internal subversion and winning popular confidence" were considered vital to ensure the continuance of a moderate and pro-Western regime after Idris' death.<sup>17</sup> The country would be weaned from their reliance on the military elements of the treaty and would achieve greater autonomy in terms of defence. The British would continue to maintain influence through arms sales, training and the military missions.

Following the 1967 War, which had highlighted Libya's weak security arrangements, a degree of political stability had been restored in the country. Whilst the loyalty and effectiveness of Libyan security and defence forces remained circumspect, the future of the regime appeared less fragile. In March 1968 a JIC note

---

<sup>15</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>16</sup> M. Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power* (London, 1995), pp. 100-108. N.J. Ashton, 'A microcosm of decline: British loss of nerve and military intervention in Jordan and Kuwait, 1958 and 1961', *The Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 1069-1083. T Petersen, 'Crossing the Rubicon? Britain's withdrawal from the Middle East, 1964-1968: A Bibliographical Review', *The International History Review*, 22 (2000), 323. R. Ovendale, *Britain and the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East* (London, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> OPD (67) 64, British Forces in Libya, 26 July 1967, FCO 39/119.

considered that the King would be able to maintain his authority if he retained effective control and did not place himself in an anti-Arab posture. Already a consensus of support appeared to be forming for Idris' expected successor, the Crown Prince, despite the fact that he had difficulty in gaining popularity in government and amongst the Libyan people.<sup>18</sup>

Libya's internal political environment had achieved some stability through oil wealth, but the youth of Libya remained marginalised and society was in a state of flux. Oil wealth had raised political and social issues the regime appeared poorly equipped to deal with. The economy was not being managed well and the financial benefits of oil wealth were not put to good use.<sup>19</sup> Employment opportunities were poor, hindered further by a poor education system and the unemployed and students were radicalised by the immigration into the country of teachers and technicians, with Arab Nationalist sympathies. The economy saw a growth in imports and inflation and this fed into unrest. As we have seen the regime was regarded as corrupt and inefficient and became more isolated from the population. The King's reliance on the corrupt Shelhi family did not help the monarchy, although the King himself remained popular. The regime was fortunate that Nasser's loss of prestige in the Arab world, as well the Libyan peoples' mistrust of Egyptian aims, particularly towards Libya's oil reserve, tended to undermine some Egyptian propaganda directed against the Libyan Government and Tripoli's relationship with the West. However, the regime, to secure its position, appeared to focus upon modernizing the small and ineffective Libyan armed forces and replacing the diminishing British contribution.<sup>20</sup>

Internal security issues were addressed immediately after the disturbances of 1967. In August the Libyan Prime Minister, Abdul Qadir Al-Badri, handed the British Ambassador a long list of military hardware needed for the security forces, some

---

<sup>18</sup> JIC (68) (n) 37, 21 March 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>19</sup> D. Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence* (New York, 1998), p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> JIC (68) (n) 37, 21 March 1968, CAB 163/92.

specifically British.<sup>21</sup> Prime Minister Badri also said he would buy from the French or Americans if the British could not deliver.<sup>22</sup> In December 1967 a contract for £7million to supply the Libyan security forces was signed; this contract incorporated 80 Saladin Armoured Cars, 56 Saracens Armoured Personnel Carriers, 4 command vehicles and 90 Ferret Scout cars with ammunition, spare parts, weapons and associated equipment.<sup>23</sup> The poor and ineffective nature of the Libyan internal intelligence organisation during the summer disturbances led the Foreign Office to conclude that Tripoli also needed practical help with internal security and in countering Egyptian subversion which had “been more successful than we thought”.<sup>24</sup>

External security was also a concern for the Libyan Government given their strategic vulnerability, sandwiched between Arab Nationalist regimes in Algeria, Egypt and the Sudan. In July 1967 the Libyan Prime Minister said that the “threatening attitude of Libya’s neighbours and particularly Algeria rendered urgent the strengthening of Libya’s forces”.<sup>25</sup> Libya’s military expansion was elaborated upon further during Idris’ “Speech from the Throne” on 20 November 1967 which forecast that Libya hoped “to build in the shortest time a military deterrent force which it believes should be built to replace the non-Libyan alternatives”.<sup>26</sup> The government had drawn up a five year plan entailing a programme of developing the Libyan army. The speech was significant because it was recognised by the FCO as a sign that the Libyans were embarking upon an independent policy, albeit in its initial stages.<sup>27</sup> Ambassador Sarrell suspected that the King believed he could also quash internal subversion by bigger and better weapons, rather than focusing on improving the

---

<sup>21</sup> Benghazi to FO, 3 August 1967, DEFE 24/313.

<sup>22</sup> Benghazi to FO, 27 July 1967, DEFE 11/706.

<sup>23</sup> Brief, Defence Secretariat, DS, 13 May 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>24</sup> FO to Washington, 28 June 1967, FCO 39/118.

<sup>25</sup> Benghazi to FO, 27 July 1967, DEFE 11/706.

<sup>26</sup> J Dodds to P Mallet, 1 December 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>27</sup> W R Tomkys to J Dodds, 24 November 1967, FCO 39/78.

organization of the security forces. However, the British benefited from large orders for arms and Sarrell claimed, "British support through equipment maintenance and training (which) would be a key factor in facilitating this desirable but fundamental transition in Libya's defence philosophy" allowing the relinquishment of British military support and ultimately greater Libyan political independence.<sup>28</sup>

Although the British would be reducing their military support to Libya, training contracts would enable the British to maintain control over internal security in Libya and the King's military forces. From 1967 the British would arm the Libyan forces more substantially with missile and tank contracts, which required extensive training and support from British advisors given that the Libyans simply did not have the resources or skills available to run their own defences.

Between 26 February and 8 March 1968 the Libyan Minister of Defence, Sayid Hamid Al Abaidi paid a visit to Britain and in talks with Healey announced his intention to buy only British arms and depend on Britain for training, reorganizing and re-equipping the Libyan armed forces.<sup>29</sup> In May 1968 a comprehensive air defence missile scheme manufactured by BAC (British Aircraft Corporation) for Libya was signed.<sup>30</sup> A project to reorganise and re-equip the Libyan armed forces, as agreed to by Healey and Abaidi in March 1968 led to an MOD visit to Libya on 25 March 1968, which resulted in a rearmament and retraining report produced by Lieutenant General Sir John Mogg.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 5 August 1967, DEFE 11/706.

<sup>29</sup> D J Speares to J Henniker and D Allen, Superintending Under-Secretary North and East African Department, 4 April 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>30</sup> Brief for visit of Secretary of State to Tripoli Libya, 19-20 May 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>31</sup> Local Intelligence Committee, Libya, LIC minutes, 2 May 1968, CAB 163/92.

In April 1968 the Libyan Prime Minister said that he was most anxious to secure training for the Libyan army, by the British army, at all levels. He wished the British army would “take over the Libyan army” to restore its morale and self respect and he hoped that in addition to providing training courses, the British would provide senior officers to visit the army from time to time.<sup>32</sup> Defence Secretary Healey visited Libya in May 1968 and the Libyan Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush requested that joint training exercises should take place. Playing on the threat from Libya’s neighbours, Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush expressed concern over the Soviet military presence in the Mediterranean whilst Chief of Staff Nuri stressed the activities of the Soviet Union in Algeria. Healey urged on the Libyans an emphasis on self-reliance in internal security. Healey considered that “as the British Government’s own defence plans were being readjusted ...he believed that his own policy should be adjusted to give greater priority to training for foreign friends ... (and) undertook to give their training requirements special treatment”. Al-Bakkoush also welcomed help in the “organization of intelligence” for improving security in the army and secondly for the establishment of a channel of continuous information in order to improve what he termed “close intelligence” between Britain and Libya.<sup>33</sup>

Mogg’s rearming and retraining report was issued in June 1968 and stated that Libya, with a population of only 1.6 million, could not withstand, unaided, an all out attack and it was therefore essential that Libya had allies who were prepared to come to her aid. However Mogg felt that Libya must present a worthwhile and credible deterrent to a potential aggressor through the purchase of advanced military equipment.<sup>34</sup> The British agreed to arm the Libyan military with the latest equipment.

---

<sup>32</sup> R Sarrell to FO, 11 April 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>33</sup> Record of meeting, Prime Minister of Libya and UK Secretary of State for Defence in Tripoli, 20 May 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>34</sup> Mogg Report, Libyan Defence, 21 June 1968, DEFE 11/632.

This arms contract would include the Chieftain tank and Abbotts self-propelled guns.<sup>35</sup> The Army equipment contract, valued at £46.8 million was signed by the Minister of Defence for Equipment, John Morris and the Libyan Minister of Defence on 21 April, 1969. The Libyans were to receive the first six Chieftains in December 1969; the contract specified that delivery of 40 in the second half of 1970 and thereafter at a rate of four or five per month until completion of deliveries in 1973.<sup>36</sup> Mogg's report also urged an increase in the strength of the British military mission for advisory purposes and the need for British loaned officers on the staffs of Libyan HQs, in training schools and to units where necessary. Whilst modernising the Libyan army, the British would provide officers and NCOs who would wear Libyan insignia.<sup>37</sup> A Memorandum of Understanding dealing with the reorganisation and re-equipment of the Libyan Army was finally signed by Healey and the Libyan Minister of Defence, Abaidi on 30 September 1968 and London agreed to provide 20 officers to assist in the reorganisation.<sup>38</sup>

The consequences of the defence equipment sales and training packages would be that the visible British military presence would eventually wither away, but a residual, controlling element would replace it within the ranks of the Libyan armed forces. The British would be able to maintain if not increase their political and military

---

<sup>35</sup> Marshall E G Jones Commander BFNE to MG J H Gibbon Secretary of COS Committee, 4 July 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>36</sup> OPD (69) 48, Arms for Libya, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>37</sup> Mogg Report, Libyan Defence, 21 June 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>38</sup> MOD Defence Secretariat DS 15, Principal Personnel Officers Committee, Libya-Loan Service Personnel, 8 August 1969, WO 32/19316, National Archives, London. Negotiations on this matter had not concluded before the revolution in September 1969 although London had prepared Memoranda of Understanding covering the terms and conditions of service for loaned officers. The Libyans were particularly concerned that British personnel should be exempt from Libyan military law.

influence over the regime. Outwardly however the country appeared to be developing a more independent stance. This impression was facilitated by the appointment of the educated and progressive Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush as Prime Minister in October 1967. Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush appeared to have been favoured by the King as he appealed to Bedouin, educated people in the towns and liberals. The British noted that, despite appearances, the Libyan cabinet still had some steadying, older members.<sup>39</sup> Al-Bakkoush's policy on British facilities was no different from his predecessor and consisted of, what Sarrell considered "bromide" against the facilities in Al-Bakkoush's November policy statement.<sup>40</sup> The FCO line was that "certainly as far as this country is concerned we have no objection to the Libyan Government making plenty of noise about this suggestion (withdrawal) so long as their sound and fury continues to signify no more than the wish to placate the forces of Arab Nationalism". In fact Al Bakkoush had phoned Ambassador Sarrell to tell him of the content of his statement.<sup>41</sup>

Under Al-Bakkoush's premiership Libya, rich through oil revenue and prompted by pressure from Arab states involved in the Six Day War to share a commitment to Arab politics, began to assert itself and show signs of apparent independence. This policy of "Libyanisation" saw the Prime Minister entertain plans for an economic regional block with Chad, Niger, Algeria and Malta and to build up Libyan influence by the grant of aid. During 1968 Al-Bakkoush also embarked on an extensive tour of the Middle East and Europe, eager to play a significant diplomatic role and be "a sophisticated statesman able to discuss a wide range of subjects beyond the sphere of the Middle East".<sup>42</sup> Ambassador Sarrell believed Al-Bakkoush was the first Libyan Prime Minister

---

<sup>39</sup> R A Kealey to P Mallet, 7 November 1967, FCO 39/78.

<sup>40</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 30 October 1967, FCO 39/78.

<sup>41</sup> R A Kealey to P Mallet, 7 November 1967, FCO 39/78.

<sup>42</sup> D Morphet, Assistant Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to H L Lawrence-Wilson, Under-Secretary Cabinet Office, 19 August 1968, FCO 27/213.

prepared to think about the day when British troops would be gone, and was therefore taking active steps to prepare Libya against the time when she would have to assume a larger share in her own defence.<sup>43</sup>

By the summer of 1968 the Libyan internal situation was calm and the pace of administrative change and reform set by Al-Bakkoush moved on. The Prime Minister enjoyed the support of the King and the confidence of the people as youthful intellectuals were brought into the administration. The King's health, always a concern for British policy-makers, varied from day to day but he still had firm control and stood by Abdul Hamid Al-Bakkoush in July when opposition had mounted against the Prime Minister from conservative members of the Government. This support did not last and on 5 September 1968 Al-Bakkoush resigned when Idris rejected his cabinet reshuffle. Conservative Cyrenaican nobles opposed Al-Bakkoush's liberal reforms and whilst the King believed Al Bakkoush's policies were right, he feared they had set a pace which conservative elements found unacceptable. A British security report on Libya noted that Al Bakkoush seemed disheartened before his resignation, as opposition to his reforms was great. Income tax law, the introduction of housing allowance for government employees and attempts to curb the size of the civil service and impose proper budgetary control on government expenditure were contentious issues.<sup>44</sup> Wanees Al-Qaddafi took over as Prime Minister and the Tripoli Embassy judged this bad for British interests because he had a record of indecisiveness and it was likely the government would gradually lose direction.<sup>45</sup> In November 1968 Al-Qaddafi stated that Libya would pursue a moderate, constructive policy and was continuing negotiations to end foreign military bases and to convert them into Libyan bases.<sup>46</sup> Wanees was to remain Prime Minister until September 1969 when the Monarchy was overthrown.

---

<sup>43</sup> R Sarrell to FCO, 8 May 1968, FCO 27/213.

<sup>44</sup> LIC Libya report, September 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>45</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 5 September 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>46</sup> 'Libyan Talks on Foreign Bases', *The Times*, 18 November 1968, 4.

By the end of the year and despite the change of government in Libya, Ambassador Sarrell concluded that Anglo-Libyan relations were excellent and there was no talk of revising the treaty during Minister of State Goronwy Roberts' visit to Libya in October 1968. Sarrell continued to promote the opportunities for trade and development in the country. He believed that "the important factor now is our ability to help the Libyans fill the immense technical and cultural gaps which their sudden access to wealth has revealed... it is by our performance in this that the day to day temperature of Anglo-Libyan relations is judged".<sup>47</sup> He added later that UK should "make a special effort to meet their (Libyan) requirements".<sup>48</sup> Sarrell's advice was promoted in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and in July 1969 the new British Ambassador, Donald J Maitland was briefed to safeguard military equipment sales, encourage and develop Libyan development through oil wealth and increase Britain's economic and commercial relations by promoting British goods.<sup>49</sup>

By the summer of 1969 the foundation of the Anglo-Libyan relationship, the 1953 treaty, had only another four years to run but no serious consideration had been given to bringing the treaty to an end or to replacing it before 1973. Prior to his departure from the post in the summer of 1969, Ambassador Sarrell, who appeared enthusiastic to continue to secure Britain's influence in the country, suggested that it might be a good time to consider some form of negotiations, as Idris, who was growing frailer would be more sympathetic than a new regime to British interests.<sup>50</sup> Sarrell thought "that there is no possibility whatsoever of negotiating a revision of the treaty, or a new treaty with the government of Libya which would secure our training facilities while letting us out of our defence commitment", nor did it appear that the Libyans would wish to negotiate any fresh treaty on defence of the country. A British withdrawal from

---

<sup>47</sup> Ambassador to FCO, 17 October 1968, FCO 39/352.

<sup>48</sup> D J Speares to D Allen, 28 October 1968, FCO 39/352.

<sup>49</sup> D J Speares to Private Secretary, 30 July 1969, FCO 39/451.

<sup>50</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 22 May 1969, FCO 46/348.

the treaty before the expiry date would undermine Idris' confidence in Britain.<sup>51</sup> The treaty relationship was to remain but its continuance was dependent on maintaining the external security of the regime.

---

<sup>51</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 3 June 1969, FCO 46/348.

## 5.2 Defence Planning

From 1968 the British remained committed to the defence of Libya and military planning was still firmly focused upon holding the country against an external attack from Egypt.<sup>52</sup> Libya's western neighbour, Algeria also posed a military threat which needed to be considered.<sup>53</sup> Whilst Egypt had been severely and humiliatingly defeated in June 1967, a JIC report a year later considered that Egypt's serious economic and internal political problems could tempt the leadership to seek a foreign policy or military success abroad and Libya, with her increasing oil wealth, offered better prospects than most, but a direct attack was considered unlikely in the immediate future.<sup>54</sup> Libyan-Egyptian relations had improved since the summer of 1967. In December of that year King Idris reported that Egyptian Vice President Hussein Mahmoud Hassan el-Shafei, during a visit to Libya, had told him that Egyptian policy had now changed and that Cairo wished to be in brotherly friendship with Libya, although the King remained distrustful of Nasser.<sup>55</sup> Libyan-Egyptian rapprochement was due in no small part to the contribution the Libyan Government paid to the reconstruction of the Egyptian army and economy following Cairo's defeat in June.

In 1968, as a result of both the 1966 Defence Review and a reconsideration of the Egyptian threat, the Chiefs of Staff requested a wide-ranging study on the ways and means by which British forces could offer military assistance to Libya. Work began on

---

<sup>52</sup> JIC (68) (n) 37, 21 March 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>53</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>54</sup> JIC (68) 44 Final, UAR threat to Libya up to end of 1973, 25 June 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>55</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 8 January 1968, FCO 39/78.

re-evaluating military plans for the defence of Libya, involving no other contingency than that of a frontal attack from Egypt. This was considered a remote possibility given the British deterrent. The only likely event that might lead to Egyptian involvement in Libya was if the internal political situation had deteriorated to a point where the Egyptians would wish to exploit the situation. This might occur after a period of internal unrest like a revolution or during a transitional period in Libyan politics.<sup>56</sup> Although London was not obliged to intervene in internal trouble in Libya, any domestic political or military conflict which had been externally inspired could legitimately lead to British intervention if the King or government requested aid or British lives and property were at risk. Deterrence remained the central feature of British plans for the military defence of Libya along with the ability to rapidly deploy forces to the country via the El Adem entry point. A defence planning paper identifying the means by which the British could come to the aid of Libya was accepted by the Chiefs of Staff on 3 July 1969 and a revised plan for military assistance to Libya was initiated, although the revolution of September 1969 subsequently halted this process.

The defence planning paper is an interesting document because it recognises that the defence of Libya carried wider strategic consequences and was very much part of the Cold War conflict. The paper stated that a “contingency” plan of a pre-emptive first strike by British aircraft upon Egyptian forces might be necessary should Cairo’s mobilisation be so swift as to put British plans at grave risk of defeat. This scenario would place the British Government, upon whose shoulders the paper laid the responsibility for the decision, in an extremely sensitive political and diplomatic position. Any apparent British offensive action, with echoes of the Suez Crisis in 1956, would lead to pan-Arab condemnation and risk Egypt’s ally, the Soviet Union, being drawn into a potential regional conflict. Given Washington’s commitment through the “Johnson Letter”, the United States would be unlikely to stand by and see two allies, Britain and Libya, defeated and the US position undermined, thereby raising

---

<sup>56</sup> JIC (68) 44 Final, UAR threat to Libya up to end of 1973, 25 June 1968, CAB 163/92.

the stakes in Libya into a strategic global conflict. The Soviet Union however, would in the paper's view, urge restraint on Cairo anxious that the regime not suffer another military setback.<sup>57</sup>

The other threat to Libya lay from Algeria. The Libyan relationship with Algeria remained unsettled because Algeria was governed by a non-aligned nationalist regime that also competed with Libya for gas and oil sales. Libyan Prime Minister Al-Bakkoush said in April 1968 that so long as President Houari Boumedienne was in command in Algeria there was nothing to be done regarding relations.<sup>58</sup> Both the Libyans and British had been nervous during the Six Day War over Algerian intentions because Algerian forces were allowed to transit to Egypt via Benina airfield in Libya. The Algerians could have chosen to use their temporary military presence in Libya to support any uprising and British forces could have been drawn into any conflict, as this would constitute an attack from outside Libya. In June 1967 Headquarters in Cyrenaica had asked for permission to ready British tanks in El Adem as a security precaution, although in the event Algerian forces were sent to Egypt by sea.<sup>59</sup>

London's perceptions of the scale of the Algerian threat to Libya are hard to discern. JIC documents are not de-classified in the National Archives but as the British undertook studies in conjunction with the USA on the Algerian threat it is reasonable to expect Washington's conclusions of the Algerian threat were not dissimilar. Washington agreed with London's interpretation of the Algerian menace, outlined in a report in September 1967.<sup>60</sup> In 1969 Washington considered that "the lion's share of the Algerian Government's money and manpower is being spent on improving the domestic situation. In another significant and favourable trend, Algeria has worked hard to improve significantly cooperation with its Maghreb neighbours" leading to a

---

<sup>57</sup> DP35/68 (Final), 20 June 1969, FCO 46/316.

<sup>58</sup> R Sarrell to FCO, 22 April 1968, FCO 27/213.

<sup>59</sup> HQ British Troops, Cyrenaica El Adem to MOD, 5 June 1967, FCO 39/345.

<sup>60</sup> Washington to FO, 9 September 1967, FCO 39/119.

Moroccan-Algerian rapprochement. Worryingly for Western interests, Soviet influence over the past year had continued to grow. Algiers steadfastly maintained they would not grant military bases to foreigners, but Soviet leverage, based on substantial military, economic and trade programs had grown stronger whilst French influence continued to decline. But as “vociferously anti-imperialist, a loud supporter of armed struggle by the Palestinians in the Middle East, and an underwriter of modest assistance for African liberation movements”, the regime certainly was at odds with the Idris regime.<sup>61</sup> Algeria’s military threat had grown since 1963, having received \$250 million worth in planes, tanks and ships from the USSR. Algeria’s armed forces were now almost completely dependent on Moscow for spare parts, replacements, training, and ammunition and between 1,200 and 1,500 Soviet military advisors and technicians were placed in Algeria.<sup>62</sup>

Whilst Algeria was a potential threat to Libya, British defence planning to counter this threat was not pursued. This was because an Algerian attack was considered to be unlikely.<sup>63</sup> In January 1968 the Ministry of Defence was instructed not to plan for meeting an Algerian attack and this position had not changed by the end of the year.<sup>64</sup> British planners considered that Washington was obliged to protect Libya against an

---

<sup>61</sup> Interests Section in Algeria to the Department of State, Summary of Air-gram A-102, 7 April 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol E5, Documents on Africa, 13.

Available from <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p2/d13> [3 August 2010].

<sup>62</sup> Report : Algeria: Troubles Ahead, 19 August 1969. FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol E5, Documents on Africa, 13.

Available from <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p2/d15> [3rd August 2010].

<sup>63</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>64</sup> A Brooke Turner, First Secretary FO, to R A Sykes, 22 January 1968, FCO 39/121.

attack from Algeria through the Johnson Letter, which “was not tied to Egypt as such”.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile British intelligence reports noted that the Algerian and Egyptian threat to Libya had subsided during 1968. In May Egyptian subversion in Libya was at a low ebb.<sup>66</sup> Algeria appeared to be too involved in monitoring its own internal and external security to be concerned with Libya.<sup>67</sup> The Libyan Prime Minister visited Algiers in May 1968 and both countries appeared anxious to make sure the visit was a success and a contentious border mapping dispute dating from French colonial times was not raised. This issue related to the border being drawn to the east of a range of hills, which the Libyans considered to be the natural national dividing line. Libyan tribes were moving into the hills when migrating and giving the Algerians grounds for a grievance. The French Foreign Ministry had undertaken to look into this matter without commitment.<sup>68</sup> By the end of 1968 local intelligence reports recorded that Algeria and Egypt were keeping their “heads down” in Libya. The internal situation was much quieter.<sup>69</sup>

To Libya's benefit in 1969 the US State Department recognised that Algeria was trying “to avoid too great a dependence on either of its major aid donors, France or the USSR” and “Boumediene sought to demonstrate his independence by bettering relations with his conservative neighbours”. Tunisia and Libya had been less quick to respond to these new currents but both had been seeking to broaden their diplomatic

---

<sup>65</sup> DP35/68 (Final), 20 June 1969, FCO 46/316.

<sup>66</sup> LIC Libya report, May 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>67</sup> Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rusk, Memorandum, 12 June 1968. FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol xxiv, Algeria, 37. Available from [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxiv/d.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxiv/d.html) [23 January 2010].

<sup>68</sup> L Fielding, Embassy Paris to M S Buckmaster, First Secretary FO, 8 April 1968, FCO 33/70.

<sup>69</sup> LIC Libya report, December 1968, CAB 163/92.

options including negotiations on border disputes.<sup>70</sup> A worrying development in that same year was the alleged foundation of the “National Libyan Liberation Movement” in Algiers, whose members were apparently dedicated to the overthrow of the existing regime in Libya and were receiving some support from the Algerian Government. Meanwhile Egyptian intentions towards Libya raised concerns in Tripoli .This was due to reports of increased Egyptian naval and air activity in April 1969 in the vicinity of the frontier and the defection of an officer of the Egyptian intelligence service. The officer led the Libyans to believe that a campaign of Egyptian sabotage and subversion in Libya was imminent, although he later retracted this statement. The officer did emphasise that the long term objective of the Egyptian Intelligence Service was the overthrow of the Libyan regime, but only after the King's death. <sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rogers, Intelligence note 195 , 19 March, 1969. FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol E5, Documents on Africa, 1.

Available from <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p2/d1> [23 January 2010].

<sup>71</sup> LIC Libya report, April 1969, CAB 163/92.

### 5.3 Libya's Commercial Environment

Having stabilised the Anglo-Libyan relationship and secured the remaining facilities after 1967, British interests in Libya now lay not only with planning for the defence of the country but with developing commercial opportunities, particularly in arms sales and so securing the regime. The shift in British strategy from East of Suez commitments to a policy based upon Europe and NATO led London to consider new ways of influencing those countries which they could no longer afford to maintain facilities in. As we have seen the status of commercial diplomacy and export promotion had grown so that by the late 1960s commercial work was an important part of the diplomatic service, as stressed by the Plowden Report.<sup>72</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office recognised the value of trade and commerce and concluded in February 1968 that "maintaining influence is not an objective but a means to the end of fostering a situation in which our own interests and prosperity can grow. The most quantifiable of our interests are our exports, the protection of our import sources, our investment income and our relations with our creditors" as an offset to Britain's global military decline.<sup>73</sup> Overseas sales were also vital for the recovery of the British economy and the devalued pound made British exports more competitive.

British policy in Libya was in line with the commercial concerns of wider British foreign policy practice. In the Arab world Britain's role had changed from the military and strategic focus on Aden and Iraq during the 1950s, to a commercial one focused particularly on the Arab monarchies. Selling arms to the Middle East was a lucrative activity and a range of British arms were exported. The Israelis bought the Centurion tank and armoured cars were sold to Jordan, Sudan and Tunisia. The Jordanian Air

---

<sup>72</sup> W. Wallace, *The Foreign Policy Process in Britain* (London, 1976), p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> Non military aspects of our external policy: First thoughts, 28 February 1968, FCO 49/15.

Force was equipped with Hunter aircraft and the Saudis bought the Lightning fighter aircraft. Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait and Oman also received arms. <sup>74</sup>

But the sale of arms was a sensitive issue. Anxious not to be seen to arm or show preference to any side in the region it was agreed by ministers in 1967 that “we should not supply arms....which are exclusively offensive in character” such as medium bombers or guided missiles. Harrier, Lightning and Hunter aircraft and Centurion tanks could be supplied. But “it would however continue to be necessary for specific approval to be given by ministers before major new items were supplied”. With these points in mind it had been agreed by ministers that Britain “should continue to supply arms and other equipment to Libya to build up a defence capability which we consider reasonable”.<sup>75</sup>

The active promotion of arms sales had been a result of a perception in the British Government and the arms industry in the early 1960s that British arms manufacturers were losing market share to competitor nations. The Douglas-Home Government had started to review US and French approaches to selling arms and the Wilson Government shared Conservative concerns and decided not merely to maintain arms exports at their present level but to increase them substantially. The Defence Sales Organisation (DSO) was created in the early years of the Labour Government to promote arms sales. <sup>76</sup> In 1966 Healey told Parliament that Britain must secure its rightful share of a £1 billion global arms market and there was some success in this field. British arms sales were £100million in 1967/8 rising to £150million in 1968/9. By

---

<sup>74</sup> F. Brenchley, *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* (London,2005), p. 184.

<sup>75</sup> Brief, DS 13 May 1968, DEFE 11/632.

<sup>76</sup> N. Gilby, *The UK Government and Arms Trade Corruption: A Short History*, <http://www.caat.org.uk/resources/publications/corruption/corruption-report-0605.pdf> [7 February 2010], 11.

1970/1 arms sales were double what they were when DSO was founded, a real terms increase of 67%.<sup>77</sup>

In the mid-1960s arms sales had taken place in three ways: direct from the Ministry of Defence; via nationalised companies such as Royal Ordnance Factories, Rolls Royce, Millbank Technical Services and International Military Services (IMS); and via private companies. The 1965 Stokes Report on the British arms sales promotion industry had suggested good commercial agents would be of the greatest value to the Ministry of Defence's own overseas sales staff by providing an additional source of information. Donald Stokes was head of Leyland Motors and had been brought in by Healey to review arms sales during the first years of the Labour Government. However, the use of such third parties was to lead to accusations of bribery to secure contracts.<sup>78</sup>

With the Libyan Government's decision to rearm the Libyan defence forces in 1967 Tripoli's defence spending was forecast at £250 million over the next five years.<sup>79</sup> As well as the December 1967 arms order for internal security measures, the Libyans also placed a number of expensive orders for their defence services increasing the size of the army from 7,000 to 10,000 men, "a characteristic of the new process of "Libyanisation"". As Wright recognises "by the mid-1960s, a passive foreign policy and base leasing agreements seemed the best defence for a nation unable to provide adequate forces of its own" but the Libyan regime was now forced to start looking to managing its own defence, a result of British disengagement and Arab criticism of Western bases. The small size of the armed forces and their "unpredictable loyalties" meant the regime chose to invest in sophisticated and expensive defence systems.<sup>80</sup> Most important was the purchase of the BAC air defence scheme, the British share of

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> J Dodds to D J Speares, 19 December 1967, FCO 39/120.

<sup>80</sup> Wright, *Libya*, pp. 105-106.

this involving the sale of surface to air guided missiles and related radar. Negotiations between BAC, the Libyan Ministry of Defence, the British Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Technology led to the signing of a contract worth £115 million for the supply of Thunderbird and Rapier missiles with associated data handling and radar equipment on 28 April 1968. The contract was signed between BAC and the Libyan Government. BAC was to be the prime contractor and would be responsible for installation, training and overall support, including additional work provided by sub-contractors Marconi, Elliott Automation, Plessey and Ferranti. Further support and training contracts valued at £20.4 million were signed on 2 February 1969.<sup>81</sup> Upon taking power in September 1969 the Gaddafi regime made allegations of bribery and corruption against both the previous Libyan regime and BAC regarding the air defence contract. The British Government had initially courted Libyan interest in the air defence scheme but handed negotiations over to BAC. Critics queried its cost, practicality and relevance. In particular doubts were expressed as to whom the air defence scheme was supposed to counter, especially as Nasser's military capacity was much reduced. Suspicions were high that the British had used the air defence scheme as a way to maintain political influence in Libya as well as sell a very expensive system to a country that did not require it. Wright recognises that some critics considered it "allegedly a way of maintaining a British military presence" because the system would require highly trained technicians, presumably British, to run it.<sup>82</sup> Following the revolution Libyan political figures were tried for defrauding the Libyan people because of their involvement in the air defence scheme.

The Libyan army was to be restructured and provided with arms to project a credible deterrent in accordance with the report prepared by General Mogg for the joint Anglo-Libyan Committee in June 1968. The Libyans were eager to expand all branches of their military and requested additional papers at the Committee meetings in 1968 covering the navy and air force. Money was no obstacle for the Libyans. The

---

<sup>81</sup> OPD (69) 48, Arms for Libya, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 106.

army equipment contract valued at £46.8 million was signed on 21 April 1969 whilst a support contract was still in negotiation in the autumn of 1969. Under the terms of the two contracts the Libyan Government had by October 1969 paid £35.5 million. In addition, naval sales totalling £6 million since 1964 had built up the Libyan navy with orders for a frigate and 13 patrol boats.<sup>83</sup> The military missions and the availability of British military personnel at the remaining facilities acting as informal arms promoters and trainers provided a significant boost to arms sales.<sup>84</sup>

The United States also played a role in building up the Libyan armed forces. A report by the United States Air Force Survey Team on the expansion of the Royal Libyan Air Force on 15 August 1968 recommended a 15-year time-phased development program, which would provide Libya with a small but balanced tactical air force capable of performing air defence and ground support roles. The Survey Team proposed the early development of a second RLAF base, in addition to Wheelus, at Benina Airfield, Benghazi.<sup>85</sup>

British trade policy in Libya was reviewed during the visit in October 1968 of Goronwy Roberts, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Talks were held on technical and development issues. Ambassador Sarrell was keen to report to London how he personally was “struck again by the immense opportunities for us here”. He considered Libya “a growth market in which successful enterprise now can continue to pay dividends for decades to come”. The Ambassador concluded that

---

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>85</sup> President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, memorandum, 28 March 1968. FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIV, Africa, 95.

Available from [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxiv/j.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxiv/j.html) [23 January 2010].

“Roberts....left...with clear impression of the need for close coordination of all our efforts, both here and in London” to maximise success.<sup>86</sup> Roberts reported that, in view of the exceptional trade possibilities the British should immediately review their whole approach to the market. He believed a special “leg man” should be appointed who would personally contact firms in Britain and authorities in Libya to develop sales opportunities.<sup>87</sup>

Roberts was concerned with the over-emphasis on military trade with Libya that threatened to undermine the political decision to distance Britain from military support for the country and enhance Libyan independence. His report stated that “defence is an important element in our bilateral relations with Libya and the embassy wants our Ministry of Defence to supply defence personnel and to set up their own arrangements for servicing equipment supplied to Libyan forces instead of relying on the crown agents”. He believed such a situation needed to be weighed “against the danger of (becoming) too much involved in Libyan defence especially in view of our desire not to renew the defence agreement”. Instead Roberts advised that “cooperation with them should be technical rather than political otherwise we might appear to be involved in any armed clash between them and Algeria or Egypt”.<sup>88</sup> The depth of British defence support signalled that Libya still remained under British political influence and independence was not entirely complete.

British commercial involvement in Libya was not solely focused on defence contracts. British firms were involved in diverse projects from agricultural development and airports, civil construction, petroleum and power supplies. The Board of Trade and Ministry of Technology showed interest in selling the civilian BAC 1-11 and Hawker Siddeley Trident aircraft to Libya in 1967 and sought, in competition with the French

---

<sup>86</sup> R Sarrell to FCO, 17 October 1968, FCO 39/352.

<sup>87</sup> Roberts report to FCO, 28 October 1968, FCO 39/352.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

and Italians, the operations and service management of the Libyan state airline.<sup>89</sup> British commercial enterprise in Libya had expanded after the Committee for Middle East Trade mission visited the country in March 1966. By the early summer of 1967 “an upsurge of activity on the part of British exporters began to win a deeper market penetration” but progress was retarded by events in June. Conditions improved during 1968 with “ministerial visits in both directions, British trade missions to Libya, a major participation in the 1968 Tripoli international fair, visits by groups of journalists and MPs and the Tripoli/ Benghazi chambers of commerce delegation to Britain” all served to restore full market acceptance for British goods. By September 1968 exports to Libya were running at a rate of about £36 million a year as compared with a total of £21 million in 1965. The focus was on “government contracts and purchases” which offered the most valuable and clearly defined export opportunities, with “70 % of the country’s oil revenues set aside for development fund expenditure”.<sup>90</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office recognised these developments as a by-product of improved political relations for “there has been a remarkable improvement in Anglo-Libyan relations since the nadir reached in the June War of 1967 ...the Libyans are relying on us to a greater extent than ever before for British experts”.<sup>91</sup>

The British non-military commercial stake was not without competition. Washington was eager to court political influence in Libya through development. Libya like many of the Middle Eastern states did not receive US financial support because they were too oil rich to qualify for aid. Instead Washington sought to integrate experts into these nations in a more systematic way rather than by expanding existing special programs. In order to improve US-Libyan relations, Al-Bakkoush was scheduled to visit the USA in September 1968 to meet President Johnson. One of the main themes Washington

---

<sup>89</sup> J E Reeve, First Secretary Commercial, Tripoli, to Ministry of Technology, 4 April 1968, BT 241/585, National Archives London.

<sup>90</sup> Report, British exports to Libya, J E Reeve, September 1968, FCO 39/408.

<sup>91</sup> M S Buckmaster, to Export Promotion Department, 31 October 1968, FCO39/408.

hoped to stress was Libya's rapid economic progress and the United States' desire to continue a close technical relationship with the new generation of Libyans. As a practical move in this direction, during the visit the US would be signing a series of technical cooperation agreements. Washington also had an interest in oil development since American companies had the majority of concessions for developing Libya's oil reserves.<sup>92</sup> This plans failed to come to fruition as Al-Bakkoush's trip was cancelled when he was removed from office later in September 1968.

Tripoli's economic development raised concerns in London that the lucrative Libyan market was opening to fierce competition and this threatened Britain's trading position. During Al Bakkoush's visit to France in spring 1968 a petroleum agreement was reached "for the purposes of research and exploitation". Of particular interest to the British Ambassador in Paris, was that "the two governments intended to increase their commercial exchanges and negotiations were to begin ...for a cultural agreement...with (the) possibility of extending French technical assistance in the fields of petroleum, medicine, hydrology, mineralogy and TV".<sup>93</sup> First Secretary and Head of Chancery at Tripoli, Alan Gordon Munro, believed the French had previously failed on the military supplies and capital equipment fields, and could be laying greater emphasis on the cultural front in an apparent longer term policy of drawing Libya into the French orbit in the Maghreb. This strategy accounted for the proposal to establish a joint Franco-Libyan institute providing teachers and television technicians.<sup>94</sup> President De Gaulle of France had commented that Britain's links with Libya were "in France's interest" but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office considered that French

---

<sup>92</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (Palmer) to the Under-Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, memorandum, 25 April 1966. FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol xxiv, Africa, 80.

Available from [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxiv/i.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxiv/i.html) [23 January 2010].

<sup>93</sup> Paris to FCO, 5 April 1968, FCO 33/70.

<sup>94</sup> A G Munro to P Mallet, 8 April 1968, FCO 33/70.

commercial penetration in the Middle East was being orchestrated against all competitors and it suggested the British should be doing the same.<sup>95</sup>

More acceptable to British trade interests was a developing relationship between the former British possession of Malta and Libya. The British Government had signed a defence and financial agreement with Malta in 1964 following the completion of independence negotiations. However, Labour's Defence Review led to a dispute over proposed reductions in British forces in Malta. The Maltese Government were concerned with the economic effects of a British withdrawal. On 13 March 1967 an agreement was reached in which London obtained some reduction in commitments but the rundown was to be phased over a four-year period, instead of two, with the concession that Malta could seek a review if Maltese unemployment was to rise dramatically. Thereafter Malta witnessed great economic progress in the latter half of the 1960s which the British were eager to nurture in tandem with Libyan development.<sup>96</sup> Al-Bakkoush visited Malta from 27 April to 1 May and on 31 May 1968 trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation agreements between Malta and Libya were signed. Ambassador Sarrell believed the Libyans needed technically qualified manpower available in Malta to aid the development of the country. The Al-Bakkoush visit was also important as it was "in the first stage of taking the wraps off his (Al Bakkoush) own grand design for a Mediterranean and North African region, of which Libya forms the hub, with the objective of building up a new grouping with a stake in the security and stability of the eastern Mediterranean". Ambassador Sarrell explained that "the establishment of a closer relationship between these two

---

<sup>95</sup> Morgan minute, 15 February 1968, FCO 39/83.

<sup>96</sup> J. Craig, 'Escape from the Fortress Colony, The politics of economic diversification in Malta', in J. Mayall and A. Payne (ed.), *The Fallacies of Hope: The Post-Colonial Record of the Commonwealth Third World*, (Manchester, 1991), pp. 129–42.

strategically significant countries...is a process which seems fully consistent with the aims of our policy in the Mediterranean region".<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> R Sarrell to FCO, 8 May 1968, FCO 27/213.

## 5.4 The End of East of Suez

By 1968 Libya's strategic role in Britain's East of Suez commitments was obsolete. The East of Suez strategy itself was to be formally ended in that year when further cuts in defence spending were necessary. On 18 November 1967 sterling had been devalued from \$2.80 to \$2.40 in the wake of further balance of payment problems and economic difficulties. This action failed to rectify the balance of payments issue and actually increased the overseas defence budget bill by about £50 million. Chancellor Roy Jenkins, who had been appointed following James Callaghan's resignation in November 1967 and considered by Crossman as the "dominant force in Cabinet", sought further spending cuts and targeted defence, including a withdrawal from East of Suez at least by the end of the financial year 1970-1971, instead of a planned mid-1970s departure. The announcement as such was made on 16 January 1968, signifying the end of the Britain's East of Suez role.<sup>98</sup> Pham claims that from within a week of his arrival Jenkins was in serious discussions to implement stern measures to shore up the pound which was still very fragile at its reduced rate following devaluation and the Cabinet's acceptance of substantial civil cuts would be a result of a prior agreement to "very big cuts" in defence expenditure.<sup>99</sup>

The consequences for Britain's Mediterranean deployments were that the British would continue to maintain a staging post in Cyprus for the time being to service the remaining CENTO and Far East commitment. British forces remained committed in Malta until 1974 although the rundown of forces was to continue. In Libya it was accepted, in a memorandum presented by Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart to Cabinet

---

<sup>98</sup> D. Taverne, 'Chancellor of the Exchequer', in A Adonis and K Thomas (ed.), *Roy Jenkins, A Retrospective* (Oxford, 2004), p.97. By 1970 Crossman considered him "omnipotent".

<sup>99</sup> P.I. Pham, *Ending East of Suez* (Oxford, 2010), p. 207.

in January 1968 that “We should try to reshape our treaty commitment.....but if we go back on the commitment we should imperil arms orders estimated at up to £250 million over the next five years and a highly important source of oil supplies West of Suez” and therefore there would be no change in the deployments.<sup>100</sup>

The accelerated end to the East of Suez role had come about due to a number of factors. Pickering notes that economic “crises had finally worn down a government committed to maintaining Britain’s position as a world power, able to shape events and protect its interests”. Economic problems and decline necessitated cuts which were “the stimulus for change” although “Cabinet shifts” as well as “alterations in the machinery of government and policy calculation played equally an important role”.<sup>101</sup> Wrigley claims that policy change in 1967 “came about not through a radical review....but because of a seriously deteriorating economy and changed international political circumstances”. Britain could “no longer pose as a world power”. Furthermore Wrigley states that Wilson, slow to change his mind and committed to East of Suez, may have been convinced by the relative unimportance of Britain during the Six Day War, “changed circumstances in Malaysia and Aden” and even pressure from the Left wing of the party and from the “new possibilities” of withdrawal voiced by the Right-wing Conservative shadow defence minister Enoch Powell. Wrigley considers that the decision to withdraw was, for Wilson, therefore a political move to secure his position in the party and in the country.<sup>102</sup> Hughes states that a crucial factor behind the East of Suez decision was the “prevailing consensus within Whitehall that the UK’s military

---

<sup>100</sup> C (68) 7, *Revisé*, 3 January 1968, CAB 129/135.

<sup>101</sup> J. Pickering, 2002, ‘Politics and “Black Tuesday”’: Shifting Power in the Cabinet and the Decision to withdraw from East of Suez, November 1967 -1968’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), 169. J. Pickering, *Britain’s Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (Basingstoke/New York, 1998), p.17.

<sup>102</sup> C. Wrigley, ‘Now you see it, now you don’t: Harold Wilson and Labour’s foreign policy 1964-1970’, in R. Coopey, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Wilson Governments 1964- 1970*, (London, 1993), pp. 123,131-132.

role in the Middle East and South East Asia were no longer necessary or in Britain's interests" especially after Indonesia abandoned attempts to undermine Malaysia. British policy aimed to encourage the "capabilities of regional allies to defend themselves with minimum external assistance". Hughes notes that Britain's commitment to CENTO was "undermined by the fact that member states were more concerned with parochial quarrels ....Iranian-Arab rivalry in the Persian Gulf" than with containing Soviet expansion. Furthermore Hughes recognises that "as both CENTO and SEATO lacked the credibility or cohesion to make them sustainable, it made no strategic sense for Britain to provide token support for reluctant allies", although as we have seen earlier, ministers were reluctant to relinquish the commitment to Iran.<sup>103</sup>

Cabinet ministers also made a significant contribution to the decision. The economy, despite devaluation was precarious and Roy Jenkins "demonstrated that the deficit in the last months of 1967 was as bad as in 1964".<sup>104</sup> The appointment of Chancellor Jenkins was important as he fervently argued that it was time for radical policy changes and he believed "it was only in the shock of such a situation as had now been revealed to the government...that it was possible to obtain decisions to reduce our commitments".<sup>105</sup> Jenkins' selection, Pickering believes, was "intended to undermine the East of Suez role" and was the "result of careful political manoeuvring" by a weakened Prime Minister, who "prized the "world" role but was attempting to preserve his sagging influence. Saki Dockrill believes Jenkins' appointment expedited the shrinking of Britain's global role along with the "shock of the devaluation of the pound" whilst Reynolds stresses that Jenkins was determined commitments should be cut as well as capabilities. The Left wing of the Labour party supported this approach. However, Prime Minister Wilson, Wrigley comments, "had a stronger commitment to

---

<sup>103</sup> G. Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics*, 1964-1970 (Ipswich/New York, 2009), pp.109-110.

<sup>104</sup> J. Campbell, *Roy Jenkins, A Biography* (London,1983), p. 110.

<sup>105</sup> Pickering, 'Politics and "Black Tuesday"',169. Jenkins, 20 January 1967, PREM 13/1999.

sterling and to the East of Suez" role.<sup>106</sup> Defence Secretary Healey also played a significant role in the withdrawal from East of Suez. His biographer, Edward Pearce, claims that withdrawal was "the Healey policy of affordable targeted commitment amended into the Treasury policy of disengagement, nagged on by Left-wing back bench protest and finally accomplished after a financial crisis by Wilson". Pickering recognises that Healey's hostility to a further thinning of the country's overstretched armed forces had led him to agree to commitment reductions. Reynolds notes that in early 1968 Healey, who had utilised American criteria of cost effectiveness in defence, was united with Foreign Secretary Brown against further cuts. However, Jenkins was determined commitments, as well as capabilities should be reduced.<sup>107</sup>

Pickering believes Prime Minister Wilson's support for Jenkins was "more important" than Healey's role, leading him to conclude that politics as well as economics spelt the end of the Britain's world role and Reynolds suggests that Wilson abandoned the "symbols of wealth and empire" and reoriented himself and British policy to focus on Europe rather than the Commonwealth and Wilson also placed an emphasis on domestic and social expenditure over defence, to placate the Left-wing of the party. Young suggests that the 1967 EEC application was influenced by the decision to "abandon its bases East of Suez", and this showed an acceptance of Britain's "demise as a world power". Labour's application to join the EEC was unsuccessful, vetoed by de Gaulle on 22 November 1967. In contrast Hughes believes Wilson was "less perturbed by the end of the "world role", or by the consequences of the defence cuts he had overseen". Hughes claims Wilson showed

---

<sup>106</sup> Pickering, 'Politics and "Black Tuesday"', 170. S Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), p. 211. D Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (Longman, 1991), p. 230. Wrigley, 'Now you see it, now you don't', p.130.

<sup>107</sup> E. Pearce, *Denis Healey A Life In Our Times* (London, 2002), p. 316. Pickering, 'Politics and "Black Tuesday"', 170. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 230.

“little substantial interest in defence issues” leaving details to Healey. However Darwin recognises that a combination of factors led to the withdrawal and it required the devaluation crisis, Jenkinsite Europeanists, the Left and Wilson himself to overcome the “Great Britain school” in Cabinet and extract the final avowal that “the last vestiges of the imperial role were at an end”. Pickering notes that the British “were making a statement that the pretence of being a world power was being stripped away” or as Antony Crosland, the President of the Board of Trade put it “breaking down the status barrier”.<sup>108</sup>

Evolving perceptions and the conclusions, drawn in Cabinet and Whitehall about the East of Suez role have particular relevance to British policy towards the Libyan facilities and show how the British withdrawal from Libya was grounded in larger strategic considerations of the period. The Libyan facilities were of relevance to London’s appreciation of military deployments outside of Europe. As we have seen, facilities had become an anachronism in British global defence strategy and could not guarantee the defence of British interests. The Six Day War illustrated the military ineffectiveness of the facilities in Libya and underlined the redundancy of such facilities East of Suez. The Libyan bases attracted animosity as they were a manifestation of Western power and served little use in defending Britain’s economic investment for they failed to prevent an oil embargo. British defence policy was turning to NATO for defence and security and to the Common Market for economic and political relations. British global policy therefore had little need to retain overseas deployments. In addition, it was recognised that trade and economic interests could be better secured through diplomatic and political means. Sanders notes that British trade

---

<sup>108</sup> Pickering, ‘Politics and “Black Tuesday”’, 170. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, pp. 228-230. J. Young, *Britain and European Unity, 1945-1992* (London, 1993), p. 102. Hughes, *Harold Wilson’s Cold War*, p. 108. J. Darwin, ‘British Decolonisation since 1945’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (1984), 207. Pickering, *Britain’s Withdrawal from East of Suez*, pp. 12-13.

was now focused upon advanced economies rather than on former imperial territories.<sup>109</sup>

The decision to withdraw from East of Suez, events in the Middle East in 1967 and devaluation also led Washington to finally recognize that reliance on the British to bolster US global strategy was at an end. Colman claims that the White House concluded they could handle the impact of devaluation as a threat to the US dollar. Britain's continued cuts in defence expenditure "meant there was no real interest in providing help" for sterling. According to reports from the British Ambassador to Washington, Patrick Dean, it was apparent that the "increasing exposure of Britain's weakness and declining strategic value suggested that increasingly, the country was but one ally among many for the USA".<sup>110</sup> The Johnson administration appeared resigned to the inevitability of the demise of Britain's world role. But Dean added that the USA "have no intention of dispensing with us nor have any wish to do so" and the relationship was not at an end.<sup>111</sup> Washington still considered that Britain would be able "to carry out undertakings of benefit to the US in diplomacy, intelligence and technology" although it was now recognised that the defence cuts had ended Britain's role as a world power.<sup>112</sup> However, in January 1968 the Americans made a final

---

<sup>109</sup> D. Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role*, (Basingstoke/London, 1990), p. 119.

<sup>110</sup> J. Colman, *A "Special Relationship"? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-Americans Relations "at the Summit", 1964-1968*, (Manchester, 2004), p. 147.

<sup>111</sup> P. Dean to P. Gore Booth, Permanent Under-Secretary Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 25 October 1967, FCO 7/771.

<sup>112</sup> NARA, Subject -Numeric 1967-1969, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68 State Department Research Memorandum, "What now for UK? Wilson's visit and UK's Future", 7 February 1968 in J. Colman, *A "Special Relationship"? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-Americans Relations "at the Summit", 1964-1968* (Manchester, 2004), p. 170.

attempt to persuade the British to maintain their East of Suez role. For example, in light of the proposed cuts in defence, Barbara Castle notes that Washington continued to argue against them. She relates in her diary that Brown had met Dean Rusk and he concluded that "the Americans....attached more importance to our decision about the Middle-East than the Far East" and they believed "the Russians are waiting to move into the Middle East if we leave a vacuum". He (Brown) begged "my colleagues to take this danger seriously".<sup>113</sup>

In due course Washington came to recognise that "Britain no longer has the will, or can afford, to play a major security role in the Middle East" although the United States could still "constructively use Britain's residual political and economic influence in the Middle East, particularly with the Arab states, as part of our common desire to seek an equitable and enduring settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and to resist rising Soviet influence".<sup>114</sup> Whilst the East of Suez strategy had now ended and Britain's facilities in Libya were only of value to defend the country, British policy to Tripoli continued in line with Washington's expectations in the Arab states. This was partly because Libya retained a strategic significance due to the Soviet and Egyptian threat. As we have seen, the withdrawal request of June 1967 had had implications for the West's security position in North Africa and the Arab world and the Chiefs of Staff had recognised the Nasserite and Soviet threat to the political vacuum that would occur. Furthermore the British withdrawal from a strategy based East of Suez led to a consolidation of defence interests to NATO and the Mediterranean theatre of operations which Libya was a part of.

---

<sup>113</sup> B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-1976* (London, 1990), p. 179.

<sup>114</sup> John P. Walsh, Acting Executive Secretary of the Department of State, to Bromley Smith, Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, memorandum, 1 June 1968. FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol XII, Western Europe, 295. Available from <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v12/d295> [3 August 2010].

From 1968 British policy became increasingly concerned with the threat to NATO's southern flank from the Soviet Union. The Chiefs of staff had requested a study on bolstering Britain's naval presence in Mediterranean as part of NATO's forces in the area in 1968, after Greece and Italy had expressed concern at a growing Soviet presence in the region.<sup>115</sup> Maurice Foley, Under-Secretary of State for Defence stated in Parliament on 11 March 1968 that:

“with regard to our position west of Suez, our withdrawal from overseas will enable us to increase the number of ships at immediate readiness for N.A.T.O.'s shield forces, and so enable us to continue to play a leading part among the European navies in the N.A.T.O. maritime alliance...the growth in Soviet maritime strength...has underlined the importance of the shield forces, especially in relation to the flanks of Europe, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean, where the increase in the Soviet naval presence has been most evident”.<sup>116</sup>

In 1968 NATO agreed to set up a maritime force to coordinate surveillance in the Mediterranean and later in 1969 decided to form a naval response force. In line with this policy, Denis Healey on 10 May 1968 stated that a planned reduction of the Royal Navy's capabilities in the Mediterranean would be reversed.<sup>117</sup> Withdrawal from East of Suez had focused British policy makers on strategic priorities closer to Britain and roles were being redefined. David Greenwood, economic advisor to the MOD from 1966 to 1967, has claimed that the Ministry of Defence in the first half of 1968 appeared to be putting “NATO labels” on things which originally had their place in the

---

<sup>115</sup> UK and Multi-lateral Policy and Planning; Defence Policy in the Mediterranean. The British Naval Presence, 1968, FCO 46/2.

<sup>116</sup> Hansard, 760, HOC Debates, Col. 992-1115, 11 March 1968.

<sup>117</sup> UK naval presence in Mediterranean, note on Healey's statement , 10 May 1968, FCO 46/2.

East of Suez programme.<sup>118</sup> As Michael Dockrill points out, when French and US commitment to NATO seemed to stutter, Healey in particular “worked to inject a new sense of coherence and purpose into NATO’s organisation and planning”.<sup>119</sup> Following de Gaulle’s withdrawal of forces from NATO in 1966, Britain, the USA and the Federal Republic of Germany forged a consensus on strategy, force levels, burden sharing, and nuclear consultation. The Harmel Exercise and report, an effort to show the continued need for the Alliance in 1967, restored NATO’s political purpose and cemented the alliance’s cohesion. Britain played a full part in this process.<sup>120</sup>

The strategic threat from the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean appeared regularly in foreign and defence policy documents during the latter half of the 1960s. The Soviet Union was perceived as aiming to maintain and increase influence whilst weakening the West’s position.<sup>121</sup> NATO defence concerns centred upon Soviet threats to lines of communication and trade routes in the region; oil pipeline and tanker access to the Middle East was of paramount importance, especially to the European partners and the US was anxious to maintain communication with Israel.<sup>122</sup> These issues were also important to British planners, as Britain became reliant upon oil, trade and investment both from and to the Middle East. Soviet forces in the Mediterranean were progressively built up as a response to the increasing range of US carrier based aircraft and the stationing of an Atlantic Nuclear Missile Submarine base at Rota near Cadiz. The Soviet SOVMEDRON Mediterranean Squadron was modernised in

---

<sup>118</sup> D Greenwood in “The decision to withdraw from East of Suez”, Seminar held 16 November 1990, (Institute of Contemporary History, 2002. Available from <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/witness/esuez/>), 18.

<sup>119</sup> M. Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford, 1988), p. 97. Healey spoke of an increased “European defence identity”.

<sup>120</sup> R. Van Dijk, *Encyclopaedia of the Cold War* (London, 2008), p. 308.

<sup>121</sup> Draft paper for CENTO, 20 February 1968, FO 181/1237.

<sup>122</sup> G. Winrow, *Dialogue with the Mediterranean: The Role of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative* (London/New York, 2000), pp. 49-51.

response.<sup>123</sup> Soviet naval forces paid visits to Port Said and Alexandria in Egypt and the USSR made strong and repeated requests for use of Alexandria naval base, air force facilities at Suez and the facilities at Mersa Matrouh, on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, west of Alexandria.<sup>124</sup> The Soviet Union also had limited access to Algerian military air fields and the naval base at Mers el Kebir near Oran. Soviet advisors and technicians were provided to Egypt along with large sales of military hardware to replace equipment lost during the Six Day War.<sup>125</sup> The June war had been a setback to Soviet interests. Moscow was held responsible for some of the misinformation which contributed to the war and had not demonstrably supported the Arab cause, and therefore emerged "badly burned" by events. Thereafter the Soviet leadership did its utmost to repair the damage it had incurred".<sup>126</sup> Arms sales and the supply of advisors were part of a process of encouraging better Soviet-Arab relations. The USSR re-equipped the Egyptian and Syrian armies and provided military assistance to Sudan and Iraq. Cairo was not entirely comfortable with relying on the USSR and was worried by the Soviet presence in the Yemen but Nasser needed the Soviet Union as long as the confrontation with Israel continued.<sup>127</sup>

Potentially damaging to Western concerns would be the acquisition of bases in Libya by the Soviet Union. The Joint Intelligence Committee in March 1968 considered that within Libya the USSR was unlikely to obtain bases of much influence, so long as the King lived, and would avoid any direct involvement in Libyan internal affairs if he

---

<sup>123</sup> H. Faringdon, *Strategic Geography: NATO, The Warsaw Pact, and the SuperPowers* (London/New York, 1989), p.198.

<sup>124</sup> L. M. James, *Nasser at War, Arab Images of the Enemy* (Basingstoke/New York, 2006), p. 136.

<sup>125</sup> Headquarters British Force Near East, HQBFNE, to MOD, 22 February 1966, FCO 46/314.

<sup>126</sup> Y. Ro'i and B Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Washington, 2008), p. 279.

<sup>127</sup> Draft paper for CENTO, 20 February 1968, FO 181/1237.

died, for fear of confrontation with the USA.<sup>128</sup> The Anglo-Libyan relationship was also considered to be of value to NATO as a means of countering Soviet and Egyptian intervention and subversion in the region.<sup>129</sup> The FCO and the Chiefs of Staff believed Soviet policy was working “for the replacement of the present non-revolutionary regimes by governments more sympathetic to the Soviet Union”.<sup>130</sup> In March 1968 the future of Britain’s remaining facilities in Libya were considered in line with the Government’s commitment to reducing overseas commitments and the value of the Libyan facilities to strategic priorities in the Mediterranean was emphasised in a resulting DOPC Defence Review Working Party memorandum. It was held that withdrawal would result in the military isolation of the US in Libya and would place Libya in a weakened defence position, surrounded by Algeria and Egypt, although an attack from either appeared unlikely. What is significant was the emphasis in the report that withdrawal from the remaining facilities would be letting down NATO allies: “our NATO allies would be reluctant to see the removal of our military presence....at a time when the increased Soviet naval threat in the Mediterranean is causing them growing concern”. The memorandum stated that the security of the country would be threatened by unilateral abandonment of the facilities and the treaty. Such a situation could be exploited by Egyptian or Soviet intervention. The memo concluded “that it is overwhelmingly in our interest to maintain our support for the treaty until its first possible expiry date of December 1973”.<sup>131</sup> The paper was eventually submitted to ministers as a minute by the Foreign Secretary Stewart and the Prime Minister on 9 May affirmed he was “content with the course of action” outlined.<sup>132</sup> The rest of the Cabinet agreed although Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins believed that “the

---

<sup>128</sup> JIC (68) (n) 37, Threat to Libya up to end of 1968, 21 March 1968, CAB 163/92.

<sup>129</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>130</sup> Soviet policies in the Middle East, 1 March 1968, FO 181/1237.

<sup>131</sup> OPD (DR) (68) 3, Libya: Assumptions on future garrison and the treaty, 25 March 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>132</sup> M Stewart to D J Maitland, 9 May 1968, FCO 39/115.

size of our forces in Libya should be kept under continuing scrutiny".<sup>133</sup> The British commitment to Libya was therefore reaffirmed.

---

<sup>133</sup> R Jenkins to H Wilson, 13 May 1968, FCO 39/115.

## 5.5 Expanding Military Involvement

By the end of 1968 the FCO recognised that there was “less talk about getting out of the commitment to Libya” and that the Ministry of Defence had been “busily increasing our involvement in that country”.<sup>134</sup> This was the result of increased arms sales to the country, planned building development at the El Adem deployment to house troops from the Middle East and to facilitate the stepping up of training and stock piling in the country. Of added significance was the increase in Britain’s defence and commercial concerns in Libya. The British had agreed to sell the Libyans sophisticated weaponry and air-defence equipment and this generated more work for the military missions to support Libyan training. As we have seen Goronwy Roberts, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had urged some caution with this policy during his visit to Libya in October 1968 for fear that London become involved in any armed clash between Libya and Algeria or Egypt.<sup>135</sup>

Of particular significance to the increasing importance of the British military presence in Libya was the planned expansion of levels of training in Libya to enable the introduction of new equipment by the RAF and Army.<sup>136</sup> The Phantom, Buccaneer and Harrier, which had all recently entered service, necessitated extensive training, with an average of two detachments of these aircraft at El Adem , signifying a three - fold increase in volume of flying by combat aircraft. There was also a fifty fold increase in battle group exercises by the army, covering an area of around 3000 square miles of desert. The Royal Navy required extensive areas of coastline for helicopter borne amphibious force exercises, which could be carried out in Libya. As a consequence El

---

<sup>134</sup> P Mallet, note, 26 November 1968, FCO 39/121.

<sup>135</sup> G Roberts to M Stewart, 28 October 1968, FCO 39/352.

<sup>136</sup> P Mallet, Assistant Head North African Department, note, 2 July 1969, FCO 46/348.

Adem would need a small increase in service population and an extensive programme of works.<sup>137</sup>

The Ministry of Defence and Service Chiefs placed considerable importance on the training facilities. Whilst there was no intrinsic merit in the desert, the wide areas enabled the services to carry out battle group and air weapons training with live ammunition and in complete freedom. Tank crews and units could operate unhampered, without fear of damaging property, unlike in Britain or Germany. Aircraft could practice very high speed and low level ground attacks without giving rise to complaints of noise and disturbance. Facilities of this kind were considered essential for training by the army and RAF for their primary role in NATO. It was also held that there were no comparable training areas available to the services elsewhere in the world, and assessments showed that in view of political, financial, logistic and transport factors, alternatives would be very difficult to find.<sup>138</sup>

Defence Secretary Healey was fully aware that withdrawal from East of Suez and the concentration of forces in the British Isles would make overseas training more, rather than less, necessary in the years to come and he expressed, in March 1968, how important training facilities abroad were: “regular training exercises overseas will provide visible proof of our capability to help our friends and allies in case of need”.<sup>139</sup> The Ministry of Defence pushed for considerably greater use of the training facilities in Libya if British forces, including those assigned to NATO, were to be adequately trained.<sup>140</sup> However the deployment at the El Adem “staging post” was becoming overstretched. The airfield required new buildings and extended facilities and the

---

<sup>137</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 11 July 1969, FCO 46/348.

<sup>138</sup> OPD (69) 58, Anglo Libyan Relations, 31 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>139</sup> Hansard, 760, HOC Debates, Col. 50-172, 4 March 1968.

<sup>140</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 11 July 1969, FCO 46/348.

conditions had become “intolerable”.<sup>141</sup> In fact, by 1969 the RAF base at El Adem was the largest RAF presence anywhere in the world outside of Britain.<sup>142</sup>

In February 1969 the Chiefs of Staff reaffirmed the importance of El Adem, but decided that a full study on future tasks should be carried out. It was agreed that a Joint Service Working Party, under an Air Staff chairman, should be set up to consider what needed to be done in way of development at El Adem.<sup>143</sup> The Treasury was against additional expenditure at El Adem as the security of tenure for the base area would continue only until 1973 and this was considered not enough to justify a building and development programme.<sup>144</sup> As a consequence the Ministry of Defence requested the Foreign and Commonwealth Office give an assessment of the likelihood of retaining the facilities after 1973, in order to persuade the Treasury into granting financial support. Ambassador Sarrell held that the “services generally and especially the RAF over El Adem will be increasingly looking to us for support in their efforts to retain facilities after 1969 and to maintain their accommodation to an adequate standard”.<sup>145</sup> However, the FCO was concerned that the estimated figure of £2million for modernisation on El Adem would look like Britain was turning the staging post into a base and this would “arouse propaganda and hostility which could hasten the day when we lose our facilities altogether”.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, Speares, Head of the Near East and African Department was concerned that the works could cause trouble with the Libyans and endanger British security of tenure after 1973 which

---

<sup>141</sup> Draft Annex A to COS1076, 7 February 1969, FCO 46/348.

<sup>142</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Interview with Sir David Gore-Booth, KCMG, KCVO, 4th. March 1999, conducted by Malcolm McBain. Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Gore-Booth.pdf> [ 22 January 2010] 5.

<sup>143</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares 22 May 1969, FCO 46/348.

<sup>144</sup> R Sarrell to D J Speares, 22 May 1969, FCO 46/348.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> P Mallet, note, 2 July 1969, FCO 46/348.

“would depend on how far we are willing to continue some kind of defence commitment to Libya”, although it appeared that the FCO foresaw the possibility of the British continuing to enjoy the facilities and allowing the treaty to continue. Speares, acting upon the advice of the Ambassador believed that “provided we do not attempt to tamper with the treaty the Libyans will be happy to let sleeping dogs lie and to allow a continuation of our facilities for the foreseeable future”. The treaty would run on so long as no one terminated it. Ambassador Sarrell was firmly on the side of redevelopment at El Adem. He believed it was politically embarrassing that the Treasury was withholding money, and identified the failure to install a sea water distillation plant for El Adem. Speares sympathised with the RAF as “security of tenure depends on imponderables” but “is in our view quite enough to justify the works services it is now proposed to undertake”.<sup>147</sup>

In July 1969 the Chiefs of Staff endorsed the report of a Working Party on the development of the El Adem facilities and agreed to a draft letter being sent to the Chancellor outlining the financial stringency and constrained expenditure at the facility.<sup>148</sup> On 1 August 1969 the Chiefs of Staff approved an additional note outlining the long term requirements of El Adem and they invited the Air Force Department to discuss with the Treasury the development of facilities whilst inviting the Defence Secretariat to bring to the attention of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office the importance of preserving the use of training facilities in Libya.<sup>149</sup> By mid August the El Adem issue had reached ministerial level. The Ministry of Defence had put their detailed proposals for the future of the base to the Treasury at official level but the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, John Diamond, stated that the issue was one of tenure and "all our experience overseas in recent years must surely counsel extreme caution in adding at this kind of stage to the value of the assets we are likely to have

---

<sup>147</sup> D J Speares to B Sykes, Counsellor and Head of FCO Planning Staff, 24 July 1969, FCO 46/349.

<sup>148</sup> COS 31 mtg, 29 July 1969, FCO 46/349.

<sup>149</sup> COS 47 mtg, 1 August 1969, FCO 46/349.

to leave behind". Diamond was also concerned that British policy was relying for NATO training on so insecure a base as Libya.<sup>150</sup> Diamond has been referred to as "a charming but relentless, dedicated scourge of spending departments and an almost miserly guardian of the public revenues" by Dick Taverne, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury from 1969 to 1970.<sup>151</sup> In reply Roy Hattersley, deputy to Denis Healey at the Ministry of Defence, appeared more supportive of paying for the works. He stated that "difficult though our problems are it seems to me that the UK's long term interests in Libya are so important" that the Government should work on the basis that policies would succeed and he called for further talks on individual schemes.<sup>152</sup> So important was this issue that Speares, on 13 August 1969 believed it would need to go to DOPC for ministerial consideration. The Treasury concerns over security of tenure were proven correct when the process was halted by the revolution in September 1969.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> J Diamond to R Hattersley, 15 August 1969, FCO 46/349.

<sup>151</sup> D. Taverne, 'Chancellor of the Exchequer', p.89.

<sup>152</sup> R Hattersley, draft letter, August 1969, FCO 46/349.

<sup>153</sup> D J Speares to B Sykes, 13 August 1969, FCO 46/349.

## 5.6 Conclusion

From 1968 London urged the Libyans to take on more responsibility for their own security and encouraged Tripoli to develop the country's military and strategic position. However In May 1968 the Labour Government reaffirmed the British commitment to the treaty relationship. Healey visited Libya in 1968 and encouraged Libya to buy arms and take responsibility for their security. British defence interests in the country remained concerned with the Algerian and Egyptian threat. The cost of maintaining the facilities remained a controversial issue and Chancellor Jenkins urged constant scrutiny of British expenses. Simultaneously British trade in Libya continued to develop. The MOD, FCO and diplomatic representatives stressed the economic benefits derived from Britain's position in Libya and the importance of the treaty relationship and the Labour Government concurred. The remaining facilities enabled the British to promote British arms and they also grew in importance because of their training value to the RAF and Army following the withdrawal from East of Suez. Increased training also enabled the British in Libya to promote and sell arms, liaise with the Libyan military and continue to maintain political influence.

During this period British foreign and defence policy was moving towards fostering national interests and prosperity by diplomatic and economic means, rather than by maintaining overseas facilities. In 1968 the East of Suez defence strategy was ended but the British maintained the residual military forces in Libya, which had been part of this strategy, to secure the regime and prevent a political vacuum from developing in the country. The maintenance of a strong and pro-Western regime in Libya which would deny Soviet and Egyptian expansion was a priority and the FCO and the Ministry of Defence stressed the strategic implications of any withdrawal from Libya. However the threat to British and Western interests in the country was limited as long

as Idris remained in power and the treaty remained valid.<sup>154</sup> The Libyans were also concerned with their own strategic position, surrounded as the conservative monarchy was by Arab Nationalist regimes and Tripoli continued to express their anxieties to the British. At the same time the Libyans attempted to develop their own political and economic independence and secure a presence in the region to strengthen their own security.

Whilst the Labour Government sought to divest itself of military deployments during the latter half of the 1960s, British political, economic and training interests in Libya, facilitated by a military presence, grew in importance. Therefore we see a continued British involvement in Libya's development, a closer relationship and a continued role for the facilities during 1968 and 1969. The future of the treaty beyond its expiry had not been addressed and no mention of the treaty was made by the British for fear of upsetting the King. The status quo satisfied both countries for the foreseeable future as the relationship continued to be amicable and productive, but this would not last. By 1969 the Idris monarchy, despite the subdued political atmosphere in the country, was facing a serious threat to its rule from disaffected members of the military and ruling elites. The revolution in September 1969, long expected by Western governments, would usher in a new period of Anglo-Libyan relations.

---

<sup>154</sup> Non-military aspects of our external policy: First thoughts, 28 February 1968, FCO 49/15.

## 6 The Revolution 1969-1970

In the summer of 1969 British interests in Libya appeared secure. The atmosphere in the country seemed relaxed and detached from the politics of the Arab world. David Gore-Booth, British diplomat and Second Secretary at the Tripoli Embassy, described the country as a “rather a sleepy hollow, very Italian in its feel”.<sup>1</sup>

The remaining British military presence consisted of the staging post at RAF El Adem, stationed land forces at Tobruk and one armoured car squadron at El Adem with attendant small operation and training stockpiles. In addition there were the naval and military missions which organised British and joint Anglo-Libyan training exercises as well as promoted arms sales. British facilities in Libya no longer served any strategic role East of Suez, but enabled the British to maintain their defence commitment to Libya and train forces cheaply. Of greater significance, the deployments allowed Britain to steer Libya towards the Western camp, by maintaining a military and political profile in Libya and reassured the King of British support whilst denying Soviet and Egyptian political penetration. The military missions in particular enabled London to exert influence over Libyan defence and security development. In turn this enabled London to exploit trading opportunities, particularly in arms, through preferential treatment from the King and his favoured officials. The overflying and staging deployments were of limited military value although they did facilitate Harold

---

<sup>1</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Interview with Sir David Gore-Booth, KCMG, KCVO , 4th. March 1999, conducted by Malcolm McBain. Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Gore-Booth.pdf> [ 22 January 2010] , 4.

Wilson's return visit from Addis Ababa on 2 April 1969 after his meeting with the Ethiopian Emperor.<sup>2</sup>

During the summer months of 1969 King Idris' commitment to the throne wavered. This was nothing new, as he frequently would express his desire to retire to the desert, but in the past he had done so when the political situation grew confrontational, as it had done in 1964 and 1967. On this occasion circumstances were different. In August there was a growing belief in Libya that the King's grasp on the throne was weakening in favour of the influential Shelhi family. Whilst on holiday in Greece Idris proffered his abdication, after reports of the distribution of anti-regime publications in the country became known to him. This was the first time such material had been made widely available.<sup>3</sup>

The Libyan Government turned to the British, requesting they encourage Idris to remain in power. Meanwhile the King moved on to Bursa in Turkey. These developments were turned on their head by the revolution of 1 September 1969, when a group of about seventy young army officers and enlisted men, mostly assigned to the Signal Corps of the Libyan Army, seized control of the government. The revolution was launched in Benghazi and within a few days the perpetrators had achieved complete military control of the country. The Free Officers' Movement, which claimed credit for carrying out the revolution, was headed by a twelve-member directorate that designated itself the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). This body constituted the new Libyan Government and was inspired by the Egyptian revolution of 1952. The revolution pre-empted Idris' abdication scheduled to take effect on the 2 September,

---

<sup>2</sup> H. Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970, A Personal Record* (London, 1971), p. 639.

<sup>3</sup> G. Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, (Basingstoke/London, 1993), pp. 159-163. J. Wright, *Libya a Modern History*, (London, 1981), p. 120. Coup d'Etat in Libya, FCO 39/381-3.

which had been announced in an instrument of abdication on 4 August 1969.<sup>4</sup> Wright claims that there was “much rumour of coups at large in the country” at this time but “Libyans and the world as a whole were taken by surprise”.<sup>5</sup>

In its initial proclamation on 1 September, the RCC declared the country to be a free and sovereign state called the Libyan Arab Republic. The RCC advised diplomatic representatives in Libya that existing treaties and agreements would remain in effect, and that foreign lives and property would be protected. The Crown Prince and heir to the throne, Sayyid Hasan ar-Rida al-Mahdi as-Senussi publicly renounced all rights to the throne, stated his support for the new regime, and called on the people to accept it without violence.<sup>6</sup> On 2 September Omar Shelhi called on British Foreign Secretary Stewart in London and requested the British Government intervene in Libya, by force if necessary. Stewart simply asked Shelhi what he expected the outcome would be if the British were to intervene, and offered nothing in terms of support or advice.<sup>7</sup>

The RCC revolution led to two immediate concerns for the British Government; firstly, what action the Government should take to protect the facilities and secondly, should Britain intervene to place the monarchy back on the throne. Furthermore, the overthrow of the monarchy fed fears that incidents around the bases could draw British military forces into a confrontation with the new regime. On the morning of 2 September Stewart held a meeting with Ministry of Defence representatives. He was anxious that guidance be given to the Commander of British Forces Near East (BFNE) in case British troops should be drawn into events. As a result, the Commander BFNE was given discretion to evacuate families from Tobruk.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> P G A Wakefield to FCO, 1 September 1969, FCO 39/381.

<sup>7</sup> M Stewart to Benghazi, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>8</sup> COS 34 mtg, 2 September 1969, FCO 46/253.

The treaty did not require the British to intervene in a Libyan internal situation but the FCO had considered that there were a range of circumstances “in which British military intervention in Libya would be possible” although “it was hard to be precise without these circumstances”. It had been recognised that British interests would be best served if the monarchy survived but any intervention that was too obtrusive or on behalf of a generally unpopular but legitimate government, would do more harm than good.<sup>9</sup> According to legal advice in the early part of 1969, if the internal situation in Libya deteriorated, British intervention was feasible under article two of the treaty. Whilst article two stated that intervention by British forces in “an armed conflict” only applied to hostilities between the Libyan Government and another state, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Selwyn Lloyd, had written a dispatch in May 1959 stating that the British “could legitimately intervene in civil conflict” in Libya.<sup>10</sup>

In September the FCO recognised that to reinstall the monarchy political and military support from Washington was essential.<sup>11</sup> The State Department had no objection to the British trying to contact the King, but they appeared to have not formulated their own policy. Washington seemed to be waiting upon developments and it was reported that the US Secretary of State, William P Rogers, was taking great personal interest in the revolution.<sup>12</sup> The British embassy reported that Washington was holding back until the permanence of the RCC was assured.<sup>13</sup>

On 3 September Stewart told Wilson that intervention would be dangerous, wrong and not required by the treaty. Stewart believed the best hope of protecting the British

---

<sup>9</sup> Memorandum, contribution to DP paper, 18 March 1969, FCO 46/314.

<sup>10</sup> W5 Assorted notes, 13–18 March 1969, FCO 46/314.

<sup>11</sup> D J Speares to P Hayman, Deputy Under-Secretary of State FCO and Superintending Under-Secretary North Africa Department, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>12</sup> Washington to FCO, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/381.

<sup>13</sup> Washington to FCO, 3 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

position in the country lay in early recognition.<sup>14</sup> At Cabinet on 4 September Stewart stated that intervention was “not a proposition that we need consider seriously” and the situation on the ground remained unclear.<sup>15</sup> On the same day President Nasser, in conversation with George Thomson, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, expressed his complete surprise upon hearing of the revolution and considered that any outside intervention in Libya “would seem likely to make matters worse”.<sup>16</sup> Also on 4 September Idris publicly disassociated himself from the Shelhi mission to Britain and “acknowledged the revolution as a fait accompli”. Idris, in an exchange of messages with the RCC, through Nasser, announced he had no intention of coming back to Libya.<sup>17</sup> He later told the Daily Express newspaper that “he had not enjoyed being King “very much””.<sup>18</sup> Despite his frail condition, which had caused the British to continually plan for his imminent death, Idris went into exile in Cairo and died 14 years later aged 93, never returning to Libya.

British efforts turned towards securing national interests and forging a new relationship with the regime in Tripoli. This prompted swift recognition of the RCC and was followed by an attempt to renegotiate the continued use of the facilities, using the existing Anglo-Libyan arms contracts. This policy came to nothing when on 29 September 1969 the RCC announced that the agreements covering British and American bases in Libya would not be renewed. The RCC demanded speedy negotiations for the withdrawal of all British and American deployments, so ending the treaty relationship with the British. The Labour Government agreed to the withdrawal of the facilities and negotiations for the termination of the treaty, hoping this would facilitate a productive relationship with the RCC. On 23 December agreements were

---

<sup>14</sup> M Stewart to H Wilson, 3 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>15</sup> CC (69) 42 mtg, 4 September 1969, CAB 128/44.

<sup>16</sup> Meeting, G Thomson MP and G Nasser at Manhiet el Bakhari, 3 September 1969, CAB 151/153.

<sup>17</sup> Washington to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>18</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p. 181.

signed providing for the evacuation by British troops no later than 31 March 1970. Washington agreed to the closure of facilities at Wheelus Air Force Base by June 1970. Meanwhile the RCC instituted an Arab Nationalist interpretation of socialism in Libya. Islamic principles were blended with socialist social, economic, and political reform. Significantly, the country shifted strategically from the camp of conservative Arab traditionalist states to that of the radical nationalist states like Egypt and Algeria, Sudan and Syria, undermining the position of the British and the West in the Arab world and the Mediterranean and potentially opening the country to Soviet political penetration.

Whilst the first couple of months of RCC rule had not been productive to London's aims in Libya, from November 1969 the Labour Government continued to seek a new relationship. London hoped to secure trade, training rights and a limited military presence in the form of the missions. To achieve this the Government considered it important to first determine the attitude and intentions of the regime, particularly over the Arab-Israeli conflict, which would allow them to gauge the implications for British priorities in the wider region and then formulate their position accordingly. The British Ambassador had made it quite clear within days of the revolution that events in Libya were "part and parcel of the politics of the rest of the Middle East" and that Libya "cannot be isolated from the Arab-Israel struggle". Opposite the Embassy offices, on a white wall, were daubed "1948 + 1956 + 1967 = 1 September, the Republic of Libya".<sup>19</sup> Government policy aimed to steer Libya to a moderate line on the Middle East conflict rather than allow the RCC to enflame the situation further, which could cause London to lose valuable economic and diplomatic interests in the region. Simultaneously London would continue to use the delivery and sale of arms to the Libyans, through pre-existing orders, as a lever to gain an advantageous political relationship whilst reviewing the whole of the Anglo-Libyan relationship.

---

<sup>19</sup> M I Goulding to FO, 18 September 1969, FCO39/383.

The creation of good relations stalled and failed because the Labour Government would not supply the Chieftain tank, which had been ordered by the Idris regime as part of the modernisation program of the Libyan military. British ministers were not willing to export this powerful weapon to the nationalist RCC until the political and strategic orientation of the new Libyan regime was understood and progress been made on the review of the relationship. The Labour Government was specifically concerned that the RCC should not contribute to the Arab-Israeli conflict and believed that the tanks could be used against Israel and so destabilise security in the Middle East. Harold Wilson played a role in determining Cabinet's position on delivery as well as maintaining this stance up until the election defeat in June 1970. The Libyans countered with their own negotiating position of insisting on the delivery of the tanks as a symbol of good faith, whilst demanding back payments on the subsidy which had been suspended since 1965, before a relationship could be created. The RCC also demanded a resolution of the BAC air defence scheme which was mired in accusations, against the previous regime and BAC, of being conceived through fraud and bribery. Due to this impasse, from January 1970 to June 1970, the British Government's search for a political relationship with the RCC failed and valuable investments and trade ties, defence training facilities in the Cyrenaican desert, the last remaining military presence in the form of the missions and Western strategic security in Libya were lost.

## 6.1 New Political Relations

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, British Government policy was to maintain national interests by building a new relationship with the RCC. Prospects appeared promising when the RCC summoned representatives from Britain, the United Nations, France and the Soviet Union on 1 September and undertook to honour all Libyan treaties and oil concessions whilst offering to protect foreign communities.<sup>20</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office believed that the sooner Britain got on terms with the new regime, the greater the chances were of protecting vital interests.<sup>21</sup>

The Libyan leaders appeared receptive to building a new relationship but were guarded and their political position contradictory, due no doubt to the inexperienced and youthful composition of the RCC. On 2 September an unnamed RCC representative claimed the Council “remembered with gratitude the past friendship between Britain and Libya and hoped for even better relations in the future”. In addition “British subjects working in Libya were welcome and would be protected”. The “RCC intended to honour existing agreements though the question of defence was complicated and would need discussion”.<sup>22</sup> Murrack Goulding, First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Tripoli, concluded that the RCC had shown themselves moderate and friendly.<sup>23</sup> The tone of relations changed dramatically on 3 September when the embassy in Benghazi was surrounded by a vociferous anti-British crowd.

---

<sup>20</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 1 September 1969, FCO 39/381.

<sup>21</sup> FCO to Washington, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>22</sup> P G A Wakefield to FCO, 2 September, FCO 39/381.

<sup>23</sup> M Goulding to FCO, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

Meanwhile some officials in London had not quite given up on the former regime. The MOD was reluctant to pursue a new relationship with the RCC, believing British interests might be best served with the monarchy. The Chiefs of Staff on 3 September expressed an interest in reviving the monarchy and agreed that, whilst there were political arguments in favour of doing nothing to upset the new regime, it was not certain that that regime would prevail. There were also strong arguments in favour of “standing by our friends in adversity”.<sup>24</sup>

On the same day Michael Stewart informed Wilson that Britain would not be intervening in Libya and explained that the best hope of protecting Britain’s position in the country lay in an early recognition of the new government. Stewart informed Wilson that he considered intervention as dangerous and wrong and this was not required by the treaty. Furthermore, the issue was complicated by the fact that it was difficult to say what the situation was on the ground in Libya. Stewart described how the Libyan officers were consolidating power and the embassy in Libya was urging an early decision on recognition”.<sup>25</sup> Counsellor and Consul General, Peter Wakefield believed intervention was unlikely at the time because it was “too soon after Suez”, a reference to British intervention in the Middle East.<sup>26</sup> At Cabinet on 4 September Stewart again stressed that it was important to be on good terms with Libya, due to Britain’s oil, investment and export business there. Investments totalled £100 million pounds and exports were running at £34 million per annum. Stewart believed intervention was “not a proposition that we need consider seriously” and whilst a revolution had long been possible, there was nothing to indicate it would happen when it did. It appeared highly likely that the RCC would remain in control of the country.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> COS 35 mtg, confidential annex, 3 September 1969, FCO 46/253.

<sup>25</sup> M Stewart to H Wilson, 3 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>26</sup> Simons, *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> CC (69) 42 mtg, 4 September 1969, CAB 128/44.

There was an added urgency to recognise the regime because the Soviet Union and Egypt had already done so and to delay further would put British interests at risk. In addition, replacing Sarrell with Donald Maitland as Ambassador, which had been scheduled to happen that summer, would in effect constitute recognition.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Washington was also moving towards recognition. On 4 September David Newsom, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs claimed the Nixon Administration wanted to move quickly on the issue and appeared eager not to appear attached to the old regime, subsequently keeping former Idris advisor, Omar Shelhi, who arrived in the country on 5 September, at arm's length.<sup>29</sup> Omar's visit to the United States appeared more concerned with securing his future, rather than the King's. He was rebuffed with a salutary meeting with a middle ranking US representative at the UN and received little encouragement from the State Department.<sup>30</sup>

Further reasons for the Cabinet to recognise the regime came on 5 September when Libyan officers approached the Embassy requesting recognition. Prominent Libyan political personalities had already professed their support for the RCC.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Nasser expressed unqualified support for the Libyan revolution and the King's decision to not return to Libya for fear of bloodshed also cleared the way for recognition.<sup>32</sup> Wakefield in Benghazi advised the FCO that the criteria for recognition had been met.<sup>33</sup> The general practice which the British Government followed in relation to sovereign states was to recognise "de jure" a government established by revolutionary action, when the British Government considered that the new government enjoyed, with a reasonable prospect of permanence, the compliance of

---

<sup>28</sup> Benghazi to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>29</sup> Washington to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>30</sup> P Wakefield, despatch, 27 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>31</sup> P Wakefield to FCO, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/381.

<sup>32</sup> Washington to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>33</sup> Benghazi to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

the mass of the population and the effective control of much of the country. The RCC had by 5 September firmly established itself in Tripoli and Benghazi and units of the Libyan army, committed to the RCC, had reached Tobruk. All centres of population in Cyrenaica were under RCC control and public order had been maintained.<sup>34</sup>

Wakefield was particularly concerned with the political repercussions of delaying recognition and advised that hesitation beyond 5 September would affect future relations and Britain's interests. He believed that recognition would also help to dispel suspicion about Britain's connections with the former regime and encourage moderates in the new government, as well as salvaging commercial and military concerns. Failure to recognise could encourage the RCC to turn to others for help in running the country.<sup>35</sup> Wakefield was concerned by growing French commercial involvement in Libya and queried whether it was not "too late to hold up informing WEU representatives about our recognition ideas? After all, the French have spared no effort to supplant our interest in Libya. Why should we give them amongst others a head start?"<sup>36</sup> This concern with French involvement was to continue over the coming months.

Foreign Secretary Stewart received a paper on 5 September recommending recognition on 6 September. Somewhat ignominiously, the British Government conveyed the news of recognition to the King by telephone message:

"In the circumstances I think it is my duty to let you know for your personal information that we shall announce today that we are in diplomatic communication with the revolutionary authorities. This will constitute recognition by Her Majesty's

---

<sup>34</sup> M Foley, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State FCO, answer to parliamentary question, 13 October 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>35</sup> Benghazi to FCO, 4 September 1969, FCO 39/382.

<sup>36</sup> P G A Wakefield to FCO, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1969, FCO 39/382.

Government. I believe that this step is in the best interests if the continued relationship of friendship and respect between the two peoples“.<sup>37</sup>

Behind the decision to recognise the new regime in Libya was the wish to protect Britain's position which had once been secured through the intimate political relationship between the British and the newly exiled King.

---

<sup>37</sup> FCO to Benghazi, 6 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

## 6.2 Strategic Implications

The remaining British deployments at Tobruk and El Adem, as well as the British military missions had maintained the confidence and political allegiance of the Idris regime to Britain and the West. Their former function in Britain's global strategy East of Suez had ended. However the revolution had strategic implications for Western security in North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean and further afield in the Arab world. This was because the new Libyan Government tilted these regions still further towards Arab Nationalism, could potentially enflame the Arab-Israeli conflict and provided an opportunity for further Soviet penetration.

The revolution was just one of several over the immediate preceding years in the Arab world, including Syria on 25 February 1969 and Sudan on 25 May 1969. Events in Libya were particularly significant because under Idris the country had been a buffer zone that isolated the Maghreb from the Arab-Israeli problem and to a degree the influence of Egypt. The Idris regime also enabled the West to project influence in the region. By September 1969 North Africa had become overwhelmingly Arab Nationalist. The immediate concern was that the stability and political future of Libya was in question and British planners feared Algerian, Egyptian and Soviet intervention which in turn would undermine Western security in the eastern Mediterranean. The FCO's line was that "since British security is inseparable from the security of NATO as a whole, the Mediterranean must be an area of strategic concern to us".<sup>38</sup> An early draft defence planning document from September recognised that whilst Britain had no specific military interests left in the country, there was a need to prevent leaving a vacuum in the country.<sup>39</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the revolution there was a

---

<sup>38</sup> Draft DOP memorandum, British interests in the Mediterranean and the implications for defence policy in the long term, December 1969, FCO 49/270.

<sup>39</sup> DP Note 214/69, Implications of the Libyan Coup, 23 September 1969,

case for military intervention to place the King back on the throne to restore Western interests. The political fragility and inexperience of Libya's new leaders made the likelihood of the country falling into chaos all the more likely. The FCO considered that Algeria and Egypt would attempt to take advantage of such a situation to secure territory. However, British intervention would be problematic as it would require the support of Washington and could possibly complicate the already sensitive military and political environment of the Middle East as Egypt conducted a war of attrition against Israeli occupiers in the Sinai.<sup>40</sup>

In early September the FCO also gave thought to the specific strategic threat to Britain's position from the Soviet Union. An FCO draft policy paper on 12th September 1969, entitled "Implications for British interests of the Libyan revolution" recognised that Soviet influence in the region was a NATO concern because Libya bordered the Mediterranean and two member states of the organisation, Greece and Turkey, lay to the north. The Mediterranean was also the West's communication link to Israel and a transit route for oil from the Middle East, although this was in abeyance due to the closure of the Canal. The report recognised that the West had a strategic and political interest in seeing that North Africa should not be united in alignment with pro-communist extremists in the Third World. The Soviet Union was already considered "entrenched" in Algeria whilst Egypt, with growing numbers of Soviet technicians and military personnel, was anti-Western, anti Israel and pro-Palestinian. Another regime with similar sympathies would be more likely to align with the Communist world and this could lead to a further "polarisation" of the Arabs against Israel and the West. Because Britain was a member of NATO, the FCO considered Soviet intervention in Libya a threat to British interests in the region because the British maintained NATO obligations in Cyprus, Malta and Gibraltar.<sup>41</sup> Therefore the

---

FCO 46 /253.

<sup>40</sup> D J Speares to P Hayman, 2 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>41</sup> P Craddock, Head of FCO Planning staff ,draft paper, Implications for British interests of the Libyan Coup d'état, 12 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

implication was that the revolution posed a strategic concern for British planners within the context of the Cold War.

The Arab Nationalist nature of the regime posed additional problems for the British. The RCC was likely to be politically, economically and militarily aligned to similar states such as Nasser's Egypt from which the RCC drew inspiration. The RCC would be politically sympathetic to Egypt and had oil and financial resources that would benefit Nasser's weakened economy. Furthermore the RCC had the potential to take a more engaged role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A reignited or further enflamed situation in the region threatened Western and British security as well as the British economic stake in the Arab world. British interests were seen by the FCO as greatly affected by the Arab-Israeli issue.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile Egypt was determined to support the regime in Libya. Nasser visited Libya from 25 to 29 December 1969 and Egyptian-Libya relations improved to a point where the British considered Egypt had undertaken a mild absorption of Libya, with Egyptian representatives appearing in hospitals, army work-shops, and the state tobacco industry.<sup>43</sup> At the Arab summit conference at Rabat in December 1969 Libya, Sudan and Egypt "recognised their growing mutual interests in the beginnings of future union". After the summit Nasser and Jafaar Numairi, President of Sudan visited Libya, where they proclaimed a tripartite "Arab revolutionary front". This front would meet every four months to discuss political, military and economic action against Israel. In Benghazi Nasser proclaimed that Egypt and Libya would "fight side by side in the struggle with Israel".<sup>44</sup> The RCC's Arab Nationalist political agenda shared little in common with London in terms of strategic priorities and this did not bode well for Britain's position in the country and in the wider arena of Arab politics.

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> E. Clay, Third Secretary FCO, minute, 6 March 1970, FCO 39/630.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.155.

### 6.3 Securing Economic Interests

Of great concern to Whitehall was Britain's economic interests in oil and trade in Libya. The FCO considered that the RCC would put "the bite on" the oil companies and on existing defence contracts.<sup>45</sup> By 1969 Britain's economic interests in Libya were substantial. The country had become extremely important for three reasons. As we have seen Libya was an important provider of oil to Britain, with British firms Shell and BP also instrumental in the country's oil development. As Libya grew rich on oil revenues the demand for goods and services was set to continue to rise and London would seek to exploit this market. Secondly, Libya held large sterling reserves. Thirdly, in terms of trade, Libya was particularly important especially as an arms purchaser. Libya was Britain's second largest market in the Arab world after Saudi Arabia, with exports in 1969 running at £40 million.<sup>46</sup> The FCO also recognised that there were wider economic concerns for the West which needed to be considered. Firstly, the supply of Libyan and Algerian oil was important to Europe and West Germany in particular, a major importer of North African oil. Secondly, North Africa was a potentially rich trading market which could be exploited by the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc.<sup>47</sup>

Prospects for Britain's economic future in post-revolutionary Libya appeared grim. Britain's former trading relationship with the Idris regime was considered by many ordinary Libyans as less than proper, as the British Ambassador Donald Maitland, who had arrived in September 1969 claimed:

---

<sup>45</sup> P Craddock, draft paper, Implications for British interests of the Libyan Coup d'état, 12 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

<sup>46</sup> OPD (69) 58, Anglo Libyan Relations, 31 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>47</sup> P Craddock, draft paper, Implications for British interests of the Libyan Coup d'état, 12 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

“Well disposed Libyans - said that they thought the West, and Britain in particular, had rushed in to get all the goodies out of this new evolving oil economy on the basis of diplomatic or political pressure. One of them said: you have been treating Libya like a prostitute.....but I think that there was resentment at the extent to which British influence, having been military at one time, was now becoming commercial. So that was a new form of colonialism and was strongly resented by the young officers”.<sup>48</sup>

Turning in more detail to British economic interests, the importance of oil, both in production and purchases, was hugely significant. Libya was by 1970 the fourth largest oil exporter in the world.<sup>49</sup> Oil supplies from Libya were approximately 25% of total British supplies in 1968 and British oil investment was worth some £100 million. After Italy and Germany, the British were Libya’s largest customer.<sup>50</sup> In 1969 150 million tons of Europe’s oil supplies came from Libyan sources, of a total consumption of 510 million tons. Production in the country was dominated by six oil companies or groupings. The US held the highest stake in Libyan oil but British companies, Shell and BP had invested £25 million and £75 million respectively. They had obtained 14 million tons of crude oil from Libyan sources and profits were expanding rapidly.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Interview with Sir Donald Maitland GCMG, OBE, on 11 December 1997, Interviewed by Malcolm McBain. Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Maitland.pdf> [ 22 January 2010] 16.

<sup>49</sup> Brief for oil lunch, 11 February 1970, FCO 67/432.

<sup>50</sup> C Brant, First Secretary, Oil Department to D Campbell, First Secretary FCO, Defence Policy Department, 30 September 1969, FCO 67/256.

<sup>51</sup> Report, If BP or Shell look to government at short notice for support, 27 May 1970, FCO 67/432. British interests were represented by Shells participation in the Oasis consortium and BP’s partnership with Bunker Hill.

Following the revolution there were concerns over the RCC's intentions to the oil companies. In September 1969 the Libyan regime stated they would stand by the concessions but press for increased benefits. The potential threat to oil production in Libya had implications for the security of British and European oil supplies, as well as the British economy. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that interruption of production and restrictions on supplies from Libyan sources would have progressively serious effects on British and European oil supplies. Extra tankers would be required to ship substitute oil from Nigeria or the Gulf and this would raise tanker rates and in time increase the cost of oil to the customer.<sup>52</sup>

A second economic concern was the large sterling holdings the Libyans possessed. The net balances of the Sterling Area Arab countries in June 1969 were approximately £400 million and of this total Kuwait and Libya held approximately two thirds. These amounted to £ 97million for Libya on 31 October 1969 or 23.5 % of her reserves. Whilst the existing agreement with Libya on sterling would run until September 1971, the concern was that the RCC could run down sterling balances suddenly and in contravention of the sterling agreement. This would lead to further attacks on the British currency which would in turn weaken the economy. There were mooted ideas of "blocking" any withdrawal to stem or prevent a large outflow, but such action was seen as counter-productive because Britain would be seen to be breaking faith and signalling problems with sterling.<sup>53</sup>

The third source of interest to the British economy was trade. In 1969 Britain had extensive arms and defence contracts with Libya. The existing weapons contracts including the air defence contract and the army and security weapons packages which had been negotiated before the revolution. These contracts comprised surface to air missiles and associated radar for the BAC air defence scheme, 188 Chieftain tanks,

---

<sup>52</sup> Report, If BP or Shell looks to government at short notice for support, 27 May 1970, FCO 67/432.

<sup>53</sup> Treasury Note, Sterling Balances, 27 November 1969, T 295/793.

20 Abbott self propelled guns, 303 armoured cars and other minor weapons, spares, ammunition and equipment for the Libyan Army. Also at issue were supplies under smaller contracts, and a frigate for the Libyan Navy due to be launched in October 1969. The frigate was valued at £6.8 million and was not due for final delivery until autumn 1971 but was almost completed. Under the terms of the contracts for the BAC air defence and support packages the Libyan Government had already paid £35.5 million to BAC by October 1969 and deliveries of the first surface to air missiles were due to take place in early 1971. The army equipment contract, valued at £46.8 million had been signed on 21 April 1969. Negotiations for a support contract covering the maintenance of the Chieftains and Abbots were proceeding with the former regime at the time of the revolution. The Libyan Government had so far paid £9.75 million under the equipment contract. The first six Chieftains were due in December 1969. Deliveries of armoured cars were proceeding under a contract valued at £6.3 million, signed with the Libyan public security forces in December 1967.<sup>54</sup>

Following the revolution the RCC expressed continued interest in the air defence scheme and army equipment plans and stated that it respected all agreements and treaties with nations. However at the time the Libyans had not decided if they wanted all the Chieftain tanks.<sup>55</sup> No mention was made of the treaty, which the British considered the arms and training packages had been purchased under. London expected that the Libyans would wish to terminate the treaty before it expired in 1973.<sup>56</sup> During October the RCC appeared to grow less interested in the air defence system and were only willing to accept a reduced contract which would not cover a Thunderbird missile deployment. Negotiations between BAC and the RCC over the contract dragged on into December and because the Libyans had made no payments,

---

<sup>54</sup> OPD (69) 48, Arms for Libya, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>55</sup> OPD (69) 16 mtg, 15 October 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>56</sup> OPD (69) 48, Arms for Libya, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

BAC terminated the contract on 24 December 1969 with the Libyans losing the £35 million already paid.<sup>57</sup>

The future of Britain's economic stake in Libya would become a significant consideration when formulating policy. The government aimed to create a good working relationship with the RCC to maintain these interests and to hold on to training rights and missions, in tandem with a Libyan army partnership, all of which would continue to help the British to promote arms sales. Ominously, a draft paper by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office recognised that the future of specific defence contracts would be problematic, as they were considered unpopular and perceived to have been negotiated in a corrupt manner. Creating a good working relationship with the Nationalist regime also required the political relationship to be fundamentally revised if trade and commercial interests were to be maintained. The paper recognised that the Anglo-Libyan treaty signed by the former regime was becoming a hurdle to better relations and was unlikely to be retained by the Libyans. It was felt necessary to convince the RCC of the advantages of the treaty and to confirm British arm sales and support through continued use of missions and training rights. However, it was concluded that it was unlikely that the coming period would be advantageous for British trade.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> BAC Libyan Air Defence Scheme Report, June 1970, FCO 39/636

<sup>58</sup> P Craddock, draft paper, Implications for British interests of the Libyan Coup d'état, 12 September 1969, FCO 39/383.

## 6.4 The Chieftain tank

The decision to recognise the RCC as the legitimate government of Libya on 6 September 1969 had been a result of the Labour Government's desire to maintain Britain's position in the country. The Wilson Government now sought to forge a political relationship with the RCC which would preserve the missions, training facilities and possibly even the staging post at El Adem, at least until the expiry of the treaty. A working relationship with the RCC would also enable the British to steer the Libyan Government towards the Western camp and maintain British economic interests.

On 7 September 1969 the RCC announced that it had appointed a Cabinet to conduct the government of the new republic. The Council of Ministers was to implement policy drawn up by the RCC. On 8 September 1969 the RCC promoted Muammar Abu Minyar Gaddafi, of the Signal Corps, to the position of colonel and appointed him Commander in Chief of the Libyan Armed Forces. Gaddafi had successfully organised and led the revolution.<sup>59</sup> It was not until 1970 that other RCC members were named and Gaddafi was recognized as the new de facto head of state. As a result, throughout the rest of 1969 it was very difficult for other governments to understand who was holding power in the country and what the political and administrative positions were of the individuals they dealt with.

---

<sup>59</sup> The Constitutional Proclamation 11 December 1969 designated the RCC as the supreme body of authority in Libya and renamed the country the Libyan Arab Republic. The RCC was a collegial body of debate but the Chairman, Gaddafi was the dominant figure. Gaddafi became Prime Minister in January 1970. In the early months it was very difficult to understand who was holding power in the country.

The British approach was to remain positive and constructive about a future relationship. At a Chief of Staff meeting on 23 October 1969 Ambassador Maitland stressed that what had happened in Libya was a true revolution. He felt it would be necessary for the British to justify maintaining the previous political arrangements with the new regime in order to preserve British national interests in Libya. The Chiefs of Staff considered that whilst the RCC would align with other revolutionary regimes its aims would be “Libya for the Libyans” and they would aim to keep open a line to the West.<sup>60</sup> Restoration of a productive Anglo-Libyan relationship could not be achieved until the future of the deployments and the treaty had been determined. Shortly after the revolution, the Libyan Government had said they did not propose to renew the treaty after its expiry in 1973. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office considered that the RCC apparently saw no value in the treaty and increasingly resented the British presence for the “treaty is in many ways an anachronism in the context of the Middle East today”.<sup>61</sup>

The Cabinet agreed that policy was to agree to a termination of the treaty and to use a “carefully worked out offer of early delivery of a mixed package of arms”, which the RCC showed continued interest in, to negotiate a new relationship.<sup>62</sup> This strategy, the government hoped, would enable the British to maintain training facilities and military missions and this would, in turn, allow them to exercise political and economic influence in Libya. The FCO recognised that whilst the missions had not been charged with gathering intelligence in the past, the events of September 1969 and the “urgency and importance of Libyan requirements” now justified such a role.<sup>63</sup>

Arms sales played a significant and contentious role in Labour’s foreign policy in the 1960s. Arms sales to the apartheid regime in South Africa were debated

---

<sup>60</sup> COS 42 mtg, 23 October 1969, FCO 46/253.

<sup>61</sup> OPD (69) 58, Anglo Libyan Relations, 31 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>62</sup> CC(69) 52 mtg, 30 October 1969, CAB 128/44.

<sup>63</sup> DCDS (I), Overt Intelligence Collection in Libya, 7 November 1969, FCO 39/414.

aggressively before being sanctioned in November 1965 because of the potential loss of overseas earnings and legal problems of cancelling an existing contract. Despite being ideologically and morally opposed to the regime, the Labour Government allowed, as Frankel notes, “a deal between Rio Tinto Zinc and the South African Government on uranium mining which virtually gave the latter a nuclear capability”. George Brown favoured the sale of Buccaneer aircraft and naval equipment to South Africa to help limit the cuts in government expenditure and to maintain the lucrative South African market.<sup>64</sup> The Labour Government also acceded to a request from the Nigerian federal government in 1967 to send arms for use against Biafran separatists, despite considerable public and parliamentary pressure. Wilson’s attitude to Nigerian arms sales, according to Pimlott, was to supply to the federal government for fear that the Soviet Union should interfere and gain political influence in Nigeria.<sup>65</sup> Ziegler also concludes that Wilson did not want the Soviets getting in on arms deals in Nigeria and that arms contracts to the Greek military junta were also honoured despite disquiet in Cabinet and a long standing commitment to supporting democratic rule.<sup>66</sup> In these three cases, economic self interest and the preservation of a market for Britain swayed the decision. But they were also an example of what Wrigley claims to be Wilson’s “multi-faceted, tactical aspect” to overseas relations and considerations, as well as an illustration of Labour’s commitment to the maintenance of economic interests. Wrigley has noted that this traditionalism was in opposition to the “moral, socialist policy” of a large body of the party and led to condemnation of the Government as a “sell-out”.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> J. Frankel, *British Foreign Policy 1945-1973* (London, 1975), p.141.

<sup>65</sup> B. Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1993), p. 491.

<sup>66</sup> P. Ziegler, *Wilson the Authorised Life* (London, 1995), pp. 339, 344.

<sup>67</sup> C. Wrigley, ‘Now you see it, now you don’t: Harold Wilson and Labour’s foreign policy 1964-1970’, in R. Coopey, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Wilson Governments 1964- 1970* (London, 1993), pp. 125, 132-133.

Turning to Libya, the Government had agreed to sell arms to Libya in accordance with the recommendations of the 1968 Mogg report on reform and rearmament of the Libyan army. Arms supply to the Middle East, in the wake of the Six Day War, had been restricted by a DOPC decision in November 1967, which stated that the balance of forces in the area should be maintained. Policy was to avoid as far as possible supplying arms of greater offensive power than those already deployed in the area, as this would affect the military balance in the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> In May 1968 Foreign Secretary Stewart had recognised that in supplying Chieftains to the area “we should be introducing into the region a tank of greater offensive power than is already deployed there”. But the pro-Western orientation of the Idris regime and the limited military consequences of supply led to the order being sanctioned and a contract duly signed in April 1969. Ministers were influenced by the arguments that it would take three years before Libya could even use the tanks and the earliest delivery date would be 1969. Libya was also considered too far from the Arab front with Israel, so would be unable if unlikely to use the tanks against Israel. Before the revolution Stewart was in favour of supplying Chieftains to the Libyans, Defence Secretary Denis Healey strongly supported the sale and Chancellor Jenkins also agreed because “a decision not to supply could only prejudice our future prospects in this important market”.<sup>69</sup>

The question of the export of Chieftains to Libya was linked with an “agreed”, but not contracted, export of the same type of tanks to Israel in 1968. By early 1969 doubts had grown in London about this decision and at DOPC on 1 May 1969 it had been decided that it would be “unwise to enter into any further commitment with the Israelis” on the sale and export of Chieftains. Opposition had come from the FCO who were concerned about the impact of the delivery on peace in the Middle East, as well as the effect on trade with Arab countries. The Chieftain deal in particular had alerted Arab attention and “caused Egypt, Sudanese, Iraqi, Libyan and Jordanian

---

<sup>68</sup> OPD (69) 36 mtg, 15 November 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>69</sup> M Stewart to H Wilson, 17 May 1968, PREM 13/2758, D Healey to H Wilson, 23 May 1968, PREM 13/2758, R Jenkins to H Wilson, 23 May 1968, PREM 13 2758.

Governments to make separate and specific representations...on the subject". The Israelis were told that a decision would be put off until the autumn of 1969.<sup>70</sup> Golda Meir, the Israeli Prime Minister in a meeting with Tony Benn, Minister of Technology in London on 1 June 1969 asked that they "be put in the same position as Libya" regarding the Chieftains.<sup>71</sup> As Gat has shown, British relations with Israel had deteriorated after the Six Day War, as a result of British efforts to find a settlement in the region. These actions the Israelis considered to be too pro-Arab and designed to appease the Arab world. Anglo-Israeli relations "degenerated into an association blighted by mutual suspicion, resentment and hostility".<sup>72</sup>

By late 1969 the Libyan order had also become questionable, given that the RCC was Arab Nationalist and anti-Israeli and the political environment in the Middle East had become fragile. The Arab-Israeli cease-fire had "largely broken down" with the war of attrition and the Libyan revolution had added "to the emotional groundswell in the Arab world".<sup>73</sup> Therefore the export of offensive weapons into the Middle East at this time was not appropriate. Furthermore London had an important economic and diplomatic stake in the region working towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Britain's position in the Middle East had waned considerably throughout the 1960s but whilst having played little part in the Six Day War, the Labour Government perceived Britain still had a role to play in the region. This was not surprising given Britain had extensive oil and economic interests there, involving arms sales, oil exploration and production and reciprocal investment and financial relations. As we have seen the British Foreign Secretary during 1967, George Brown, voiced a sympathetic attitude to the Arab cause after the war, calling for a lasting peace in the region and this helped

---

<sup>70</sup> OPD (69) 47, Chieftains for Israel, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>71</sup> T. Benn, *Office Without Power, Diaries 1968-1972* (London, 1988), p.185.

<sup>72</sup> M. Gat, 'Britain and Israel Before and After the Six Day War, June 1967: From Support to Hostility', *Contemporary British History*, 18 (2004), 73.

<sup>73</sup> OPD (69) 47, Chieftains for Israel, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

to restore diplomatic relations with Egypt in late 1967. The British delegation played a visible role in searching for peace in the Middle East at the United Nations. Draft resolution 242 on a peaceful resolution to the conflict was presented by the British Ambassador, Lord Caradon, who was selected as a sponsor because of his acceptability to the Arab states.<sup>74</sup> Therefore Britain's interests in maintaining peace in the Middle East made any decision on the supply of Chieftains dependent upon wider regional considerations. The inter-wined issues of working towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Middle East, the protection of British interests and the export of arms to the region were emphasised by Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, Evan Luard. He stressed that the supply of Chieftains had to be considered within the context of the "military balance in the Middle East and the effect of a particular transaction on it" and "we do not want a situation to arise in the Middle East in which one nation enjoys such superiority that it may be tempted to further military action". Britain's aim was a "political settlement" to the conflict which preserved British interests and allowed these to flourish.<sup>75</sup>

The Cabinet had requested a review of arms deliveries on 4 September 1969 and this led to two memoranda by Michael Stewart on supplying Chieftains to Libya and Israel, presented in early October 1969. Both memoranda emphasised the wider regional political, strategic and military concerns of introducing Chieftains in to the Middle East. An export of Chieftains to Israel could unsettle the fragile peace in the Middle East and Britain already had "an important role to play in the search for a political settlement" possibly in the form of a restoration of the suspended Four Power talks.<sup>76</sup> President Nixon wanted France and Britain to play an active role in these

---

<sup>74</sup> R. McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, 1952-1967* (London, 2003), p.279. F. Brenchley, *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* (London, 2005), pp. 124,127.

<sup>75</sup> E Luard, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, to M Rees MP, 19 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>76</sup> OPD (69) 47, Chieftains for Israel, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

talks in order to maintain communication to the Arab states and to avoid polarization in the region. Stewart had held talks with the UN Special Envoy Gunnar Jarring in September 1969 and believed that there was a good chance that the Four Power Talks could be resumed later in the year. He noted that resumption of the talks was “largely at our instigation”. The sale of Chieftains to the Israelis would not help this process. Furthermore sensitive talks were being held on the Iranian claim to Bahrain and it was feared that Bahraini hostility to the sale of tanks to the Israelis could undermine the negotiations and lead to a deterioration in relations with Arab countries.<sup>77</sup> Working through the Four Power Talks was in keeping, as Parr and Dockrill have noted, with a new approach by the Labour Government to international issues, focusing upon internationalist and interdependent methods, using diplomacy and economic intervention, to maintain influence.<sup>78</sup>

Stewart considered that British material interests were important in the Middle East and suspected that Israel would attempt to draw the British into an irrevocable deal to get the tanks. This was something the British could ill afford to do without the risk of damaging irrevocably her interests in the Arab world. The supply of Chieftains to Israel could lead to action against British concerns in the Middle East in terms of property, sterling balances and oil investments. By contrast, it was believed that failure to supply to the Israelis would not harm materially the links between the two countries, despite the fact that during the 1960s Israel was the single largest market for British exports in the region. Whilst Stewart emphasised that British policy should be that “Israel must be enabled to survive” his memorandum indicated that Israel could weather any war within the next five years even without the tanks. It was concluded

---

<sup>77</sup> OPD (69) 47, Chieftains for Israel, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>78</sup> H. Parr, ‘Britain America East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy, 1964-1967’, *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006). S. Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), p 46.

that the Britain should not proceed with the sale to Israel.<sup>79</sup> However Stewart later stated that, on the issue of Israel and the Arab states, “my sympathies were with Israel” and that generally British policy was to “allow Israel to buy in Britain such arms ....to defend herself”.<sup>80</sup>

Stewart’s memorandum on arms to Libya stressed an appreciation of NATO’s strategic position in the Mediterranean should the Soviets replace Western arms sales in Libya. However, the primary concern was that Britain was introducing an offensive battle tank into the Middle East and to an Arab nationalist country that “must be expected to follow a more active policy of opposition to Israel than their predecessors”. The key was that “this means....that some of our arms will either be used by Libya against Israel or be handed over to Egypt for the same purpose”. In mitigation the Chieftain tanks could not be used effectively for five years and required British technical support to be maintained, serviced and then employed. British material interests in Libya would be severely endangered by not supplying for “we shall strongly offend.....nationalist feeling” driving the Libyans into denouncing the treaty, demanding the immediate removal of British forces and facilities, and possibly leading to a Libyan request for arms from the Soviet Union. This would have commercial repercussions, with a serious loss of business to the British defence industry, cancellation of contracts in the civilian field, possibly to the benefit of the French, problems for British oil investments and a political reorientation of the Libyan regime into the arms of Egypt and the Soviet Union. This would damage the political and strategic interests of Western Europe to such a degree that it would prompt criticism of British policy from NATO partners who were concerned over Soviet penetration on NATO’s southern flank. Stewart recommended that all deliveries of arms to Libya under existing contracts go forward as planned.<sup>81</sup> Cabinet Secretary, Burke Trend agreed with the conclusion of the memorandum on Chieftain sales to Libya, but hoped

---

<sup>79</sup> OPD (69) 47, Chieftains for Israel, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

<sup>80</sup> M. Stewart, *Life and Labour* (London, 1980), p. 212.

<sup>81</sup> OPD (69) 48, Arms for Libya, 3 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

to extract something tangible from the sale to Britain's advantage, in line with the benefits the British had enjoyed before, advising that "we should extract the maximum of advantage from the concessions in terms of a guarantee of the continuation of training facilities, over flying rights, other defence contracts".<sup>82</sup>

At DOPC meetings during 15 and 16 October 1969 the arms sales to Libya and Israel were debated. On 15 October ministers agreed that a final decision on the supply of tanks to Israel could not be taken "in isolation from a decision on the question of supply of Chieftains to Libya" so entwined were both sales in terms of the Middle East conflict. Foreign Secretary Stewart reiterated the threat to Britain's interests by supplying the Chieftain tank to Israel, as Arab states could damage "our economy through their holdings in sterling and through interference with the flow of oil". Within the Middle East, supply to Israel would "commit us irrevocably on their side" and the British would exercise "no influence in the Four Power talks". Attempts to "secure a settlement of the Iranian claim" to Bahrain, under consideration at the time, would also be undermined. Healey said, that in present circumstances, he "reluctantly agreed". He recognised that Israel was in a dominant military position in the Middle East and arms sales to Israel would put commercial relations with the Arabs in jeopardy. There was a danger that the British could lose the important training facilities in Libya as well as find themselves in a "very unpleasant situation in the Persian Gulf at the time of our withdrawal" if the supply to Israel went ahead.<sup>83</sup>

In discussion there was a general acceptance of Stewart's assessment of the possible economic consequences of a decision in favour of supplying Chieftains to Israel. Interestingly some ministers argued that effect of supplying tanks to Israel on Britain's role in the Four Power Talks was "overstated" because a British refusal to supply would actually stiffen Israel's position, when that country would need to be "flexible" and approachable. Therefore, to export to Israel would make Jerusalem

---

<sup>82</sup> OPD (69) 48, Anglo-Libyan Relations, 14 October 1969, PREM 13/2758.

<sup>83</sup> OPD (69) 16 mtg, 15 October 1969, CAB 148/91.

more amenable to talks. It was also noted that a decision not to supply Israel could well “alienate some of the government’s supporters in the country” as well as in the Parliamentary Labour Party.<sup>84</sup>

Some ministers considered any refusal to supply Israel should be balanced by a refusal to supply Libya in order not to show partiality at the Four Power talks. In addition, supply to Israel could well seem to look like an escalation of the arms race in the Middle East, given that there was no evidence at the time that the Soviet Union was supplying the modern and almost equivalent T62 tank to Egypt. This would run counter to British arms policy and could unsettle regional relations. In contrast some ministers argued that supplying tanks to Israel and Libya were not “parallel cases” and it was apparent that there were concerns over the potential damage to Britain’s economic and military position in Libya. There was a firm contract with Libya and cancellation would “jeopardise essential military training facilities in Libya”. It was noted that both the air defence scheme as well as the tanks were entirely reliant on British support facilities and therefore unusable if they were then transferred to the Suez area to be used against Israel. However, the support facilities contract had not been signed and it was still not certain that the Libyans wanted all the tanks.<sup>85</sup>

Stewart suggested that if the Soviets were to supply the Egyptians with T62 tanks then the sale of Chieftains to Israel should be reconsidered, although this would risk escalating the conflict in the Middle East, but Israel should not be provided with the tanks in the meantime. Healey “reluctantly” supported him.<sup>86</sup> Richard Crossman, now Secretary of State for Social Services records that Roy Mason, President of the Board of Trade was “fanatically in favour of as much trade as possible” and for the British to unload “£500 million-worth of the most modern kind of armaments on these poor Arabs, which is perfectly safe because they are not fit to use any of them”.

---

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> OPD (69) 16 mtg, 15 October 1969, CAB 148/91.

Mason and Tony Crosland, who had been President of the Board of Trade, agreed with the sale to Libya for the sake of Britain's balance of payments. In conclusion Crossman, considered the meeting "the most ignominious and terrible example of a real old fashioned Foreign Office policy, combined with a cynical merchant of sales policy" in that the emphasis from officials had been on selling to Libya.<sup>87</sup> However, Castle identified Wilson as being the only one who "made it clear that he was in favour" of supplying to Israel, which Castle considered was down to fears of "an electoral backlash for seeming to discriminate against Israel". She notes that "most of us" (at DOPC) were "appalled to learn that the Foreign Office and the MOD are preparing to supply Chieftains to Libya". Castle claims concerted action got "Denis and Michael to take the whole thing back till they got the position clearer" and a decision couldn't be made on Israel until the Libyan issue was clarified.<sup>88</sup>

The Chieftain sales were debated again on 16 October. DOPC had been widely split regarding the supply to Israel. Wilson stated that the previous day's meeting had seen some ministers supporting the supply of tanks to both countries and others had been averse to supplying Israel but held that the contract with Libya had to be fulfilled. Others, "perhaps the majority", had judged it politically impossible to refuse the tanks to Israel but to supply Libya. This point was further discussed and considerable support was given once more to this line. However, Britain's economic interests, in Libya and the Middle East came to the fore in the debate. Failure to sell to Libya would jeopardise other orders and provoke "the Libyan Government to diversify the substantive sterling balance they hold" which could lead other Arab nations to follow with the same action. British "commercial interests in the Arab world were far greater than in Israel" and therefore considerable damage could be done if Libya did not get the tanks. Furthermore the DOPC recognised that Britain's trading position might be threatened with action from Arab nations, with "speed and bitterness", if the tanks

---

<sup>87</sup> R. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol. 3* (London, 1977), p. 685.

<sup>88</sup> Barbara Castle Cabinet Diaries, (Unpublished), 1965-1976, 14 October (sic) 1969, Bradford University Library.

were sold to Israel. In discussion it was decided that any decision on supplying tanks to Libya needed a final assessment of the risks to British interests if the Libyan contract was cancelled and so a decision on supply was postponed. The postponement was also the result of the recognition that the Libyans wanted another month to review defence contracts, but then a final decision upon Israel and Libya would have to be made. Ambassador Maitland was to be recalled for consultation and six Chieftains destined for Libya were to be withheld. A decision on supplying the tanks to Israel, tied in the DOPC's view to the Libyan order, was similarly deferred.<sup>89</sup> Crossman wrote in his diary that on the second day of deliberations the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence, who had been pressing for a decision because the Israelis were sending a General to London to discuss Chieftains, had "got together and found an excuse for a month's delay", on the basis that "nobody really knew what was going on in Libya since the fall of King Idris".<sup>90</sup>

Therefore the issue remained unresolved. Highly contentious and divisive for DOPC, it was rare that such a foreign policy issue would come to be debated. Richard Crossman recognised that Wilson and Stewart only allowed foreign policy issues to be debated at OPD when there was a disagreement between the two ministers. In this case Wilson wanted to supply to Israel whilst Stewart saw the advantages in supplying to Libya and was supported by Healey. Wilson, a strong supporter of Israel was mindful of the Jewish electorate. Later in 1970 Crossman referred to Wilson's concerns over antagonising the Jewish vote, in an election year, over the issue of British proposals for the Four Power talks.<sup>91</sup> Postponement satisfied the government and Wilson in particular, given the complexity of the issue and its potential to split the Cabinet.

---

<sup>89</sup> OPD (69) 17 mtg, 16 October 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>90</sup> Crossman, *The Diaries*, Vol. 3, p. 686.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 787.

After further investigation it was clear by the end of October that the Libyans wished to receive the Chieftain tanks as well as Abbot guns ordered by the former regime. Furthermore, the RCC on 29 October 1969 also demanded urgent negotiations to achieve “the early evacuation of British Forces from Libyan territory” as well as requesting negotiations on the treaty.<sup>92</sup> The continued deployment of foreign forces upon Libyan land was intolerable to the RCC who regarded the bases “as an unacceptable compromise made by a corrupt regime”.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Speaking notes, visit of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 15-16 January to Rome, FCO 39/634, OPD (69) 58 , 31 October 1969, Anglo Libyan Relations, CAB 148/93.

<sup>93</sup> D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 75.

## 6.5 Reviewing the Relationship

As a result of the Libyan withdrawal demand, on 30 October 1969 Stewart informed the Cabinet that “it was clear that our future relationship with Libya would have to be placed on an entirely different footing”. Stewart believed this should be possible to achieve whilst still using the arms order as a basis for negotiation.<sup>94</sup> Stewart, having reviewed with Ambassador Maitland Anglo-Libyan relations, urged in a DOPC memorandum dated 31 October that the RCC’s urgency to acquire arms should be used to achieve British political objectives, by incorporating a carefully worked out offer of early delivery of a mixed package of arms. Whitehall now considered the revolution irreversible and Stewart also urged acceptance of the request for withdrawal because future relations could suffer if the British stalled. The RCC saw no value in the treaty and resented the British presence and might “wish to break away from the relationship and commitments entered into before”. It was therefore clear that the defence guarantee enshrined in the treaty and the deployments were obsolescent. Stewart stressed that the treaty had served Britain’s strategic requirements “well” and along with the training facilities and over-flying and staging rights it had “been the means of keeping Libya, now one of the richest Arab countries, firmly linked to the West and moderate in its policy towards Israel”.<sup>95</sup> Creating a new relationship, despite the apparent differences in strategic, defence and political outlook, became a priority.

Policy was to be aimed at achieving three objectives in Libya, outlined in Stewart’s memorandum. The first objective was political and strategic; to deny Soviet bloc or Egyptian penetration or subversion and to prevent Libya becoming an area of instability on NATO’s southern flank. The British should aim to encourage the RCC to

---

<sup>94</sup> CC(69) 52 mtg , 30 October 1969, CAB 128/44.

<sup>95</sup> OPD (69) 58, Anglo Libyan Relations, 31 October 1969, CAB 148/93.

pursue moderate policies and to favour a peaceful settlement to the Arab-Israeli dispute. To do this as close a political relationship as possible should be sought with a view to maintaining military liaison and experts in the country. Secondly, British policy should seek to preserve the very important economic stake in the country. Thirdly, British policy should aim to hold onto training facilities and military missions which would secure military sales and prevent the undermining of Western interests in Libya by Soviet penetration.<sup>96</sup> This would also enable London to maintain a political-military profile in Libya which could be used to influence the RCC.

Michael Stewart counselled that the Ambassador should approach the Libyans with a request to establish a new relationship and to enter negotiations on the termination of the treaty. Furthermore, the British should express their desire to enter a new arms agreement including Chieftain supplies, the provision of advisors, as well as continue commercial and economic links. There was added pressure on the British to secure their position in Libya as reports began to emerge of Soviet offers to supply arms to the RCC. To placate the Libyans Stewart advised the authorizing of an offer of some Chieftains, if only for ceremonial functions. Stewart also suggested that a supply of Chieftains to Israel should not go ahead, primarily for the reasons originally set out in his earlier memorandum from October, but also because the supply of Chieftains to Israel would frustrate the purposes of an approach to the Libyan Government.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile Anglo-Libyan relations began to deteriorate. On 2 November a demonstration was held outside the British embassy in Tripoli on the anniversary of the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The Libyan Government proved their Arab Nationalist credentials when they stated that they would make a contribution to the Arab-Israeli dispute, although this was not defined. This raised the spectre of Libya introducing Chieftain tanks, should they acquire them, into military action against Israel. Burke Trend said that whilst these events did not bode well for negotiating a new relationship

---

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

with the Libyan regime, there seemed to be no alternative to negotiation because of Britain's extensive oil, sterling and military interests. In fact Trend added that "in so many words" the RCC had said that the reasons for the maintenance of the treaty had disappeared. It was clear that Anglo Libyan relations must either be put on a new footing or allowed to lapse completely. Trend pointed out that the British policy of hoping to trade off military equipment for access to training facilities was now redundant given that the Libyans wanted the "elimination of foreign bases" but thought that there was nothing to lose by trying to utilise existing arms contracts to procure British policy priorities.<sup>98</sup>

At DOPC on 4 November Michael Stewart stressed that there was "much to be gained politically, economically and in the field of defence, by preserving as much as possible of the existing Anglo-Libyan relationship". The RCC had already signalled a desire to review the whole of the Anglo-Libyan relationship that had existed before 1969 including discussion of arms sales, training assistance and training facilities in Libya. However the atmosphere in Libya was not promising and "recent demonstrations in Tripoli, entailing damage to our Embassy and to British property....suggested there was anti -British feeling".<sup>99</sup>

Wilson, in an extensive summing up of the meeting stated that there was general agreement with Stewart's advice that Britain should "seek to negotiate a new relationship" to supersede the old one. The key to forming a new relationship was to understand the nature of the regime. However, as little was known about the "attitude and intentions" of the new regime the "first objective in discussions with them must be to discover what these are". This would then enable London to gauge the implications for British interests and determine their position. Importantly, "subject to this, in our initial approach to the Libyans we should neither commit ourselves specifically to the supply of Chieftains nor rule it out". "Considerable doubts" were expressed in DOPC

---

<sup>98</sup> B Trend to H Wilson, OPD (69)58, 3 November 1969, PREM 13/2758.

<sup>99</sup> OPD (69) 20 mtg, 4 November 1969, CAB 148/91.

about “indicating at the outset of discussions that the government were prepared in principle to reach an agreement embodying the supply of Chieftains” which had caused disagreement already at DOPC in October and had led to a postponement of a decision. In discussion, during this DOPC on 4 November, it was accepted that it was consistent with the Libyan line if the Chieftain tank issue was discussed “as part of the review of the Anglo-Libyan relationship as a whole” including arms supplies, training assistance and facilities. Any eventual agreement to provide Chieftains would depend upon attendant training packages and arms supplies and “on developments in the international and domestic situation”, a reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the influence of the British electorate. In summation, delivery of the Chieftain would be reliant upon understanding the political orientation and intentions of the new Libyan regime, the development of the Anglo-Libyan relationship review and the support and arms agreements that would accompany any supply of the tank. With these considerations in mind there was general agreement at the DOPC that London should enter into negotiations with the Libyans to end the treaty and to negotiate a new relationship.<sup>100</sup>

The Libyans had accepted that a first consignment of Chieftains would not be delivered in December 1969 and the next delivery was not due until the second half of 1970. The supply of Chieftains to Libya was once again postponed and was now firmly tied to the development of the Anglo-Libyan review of the relationship. Stewart’s advice that some tanks were to be delivered was over-ridden. Barbara Castle, Secretary of State for Employment, comments that “We had our revenge on Libya at OPD....I weighed in rigorously to point out that Anglo-Libyan relations were in a state of flux” and to commit to sell Chieftains “would be ludicrous” and Healey believed the question should be left open “either way”.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> OPD (69) 20 mtg, 4 November 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>101</sup> Barbara Castle Cabinet Diaries, (Unpublished), 1965-1976, 11 November 1969, Bradford University Library.

At the same meeting the supply of Chieftains to Israel was discussed and a compromise decision made. The political and economic disadvantages of Britain completely withdrawing the original agreement in principle to supply Chieftains to Israel was stressed. However, the Israelis were to be informed that a memorandum of understanding on supply, which the Israelis had demanded, would not be signed at this stage. This left the situation unresolved, but it did not rule out the possibility of signature at a later date, and the Israelis were to be told that the British Government would understand if they chose to look elsewhere.<sup>102</sup>

Matters became more complex when the RCC suggested at the beginning of November that London should resume payment of the subsidy. The RCC claimed that the understanding on which the changes to the subsidy were made back in 1965 was informal and with the King, rather than with his ministers. They refused to recognise this arrangement and demanded that the subsidy be reinstated and back dated.<sup>103</sup> On 13 November Gaddafi kept up the pressure on arms supplies by stating that the RCC wished to strengthen the Libyan armed forces whilst later that month Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir criticised the British policy of refusing to supply Israel while offering the tanks to Libya.<sup>104</sup> The fraught nature of Anglo-Libyan political relations were further compounded on 11 December 1969 when Libyan troops encircled the British and United States Embassies in Tripoli less than a day after the Libyan Government claimed to have foiled an attempt by elements of the army to overthrow the regime. The RCC claimed both Western nations had been behind the plot.<sup>105</sup>

To make matters worse, Anglo-Libyan diplomatic relations became increasingly erratic. In December 1969 and then January 1970 Ambassador Maitland spoke with the Libyan Foreign Minister Buaisir, and expressed hopes for cooperation on

---

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 10 November, FCO 39/637.

<sup>104</sup> CC (69) 61 mtg , 18 December 1969, CAB 128/44.

<sup>105</sup> 'Troops ring Embassies in Libya', *The Times*, 12 December 1969, 6.

technical, trade, consular and political consultation but was rebuffed by Buaisir who said that “the gap between our points of view on important issues (political) was too wide to make such consultation profitable”.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore economic relations were not progressing well, hindered by debts owed to British companies by the Libyan Government. Busair brushed this off, claiming this was down to problems with bureaucracy but he wanted the British to “make a gesture” like the French, who had sold Mirage airplanes to the RCC. This was obviously a reference to fulfilling the Chieftain order.<sup>107</sup> Sustaining and developing Britain’s economic interests in Libya was an important reason for seeking a working relationship with the RCC. Foreign Secretary Stewart had elaborated on these extensively in memoranda but these concerns were under threat. Within the first four months of the regime taking power foreign trade competition in Libya had increased. Policy documents show continued concern over Soviet arms deliveries to Libya whilst Crossman recognised on 23 January 1970 that “The French are having a tremendous pro-Arab drive. They have undercut us with the new regime in Libya ...taking over everything from under our noses”.<sup>108</sup> The French Mirage sale numbered around 110 jets. The French claimed that introducing this offensive weapon into the Middle East would not cause problems, as a settlement in the region would be reached by the time the jets were delivered, which as John Wright has pointed out, begged the question why they were needed at all. The Mirages’ operational area was restricted to Libya, where they were to be based, serviced and repaired. The aircraft were specifically prohibited from being used against other Francophone countries, particularly Chad, where Muslim rebels were fighting the French supported government, and in Niger, where there were significant Uranium deposits important to the French nuclear programme. Wright identifies this sale as a strategic initiative; an example of a “policy of strengthening interests on the Mediterranean basin in general and in Libya in particular”. Delivery of the Mirages, which “was thought to promise considerable political influence in Tripoli” in fact did

---

<sup>106</sup> D Maitland to FCO, 5 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Crossman, *The Diaries*, Vol. 3, p. 787.

not lead to better Franco-Libyan relations “so effectively did the Libyan Government maintain its freedom of political and economic action”.<sup>109</sup> British aims were the other way round, looking for a relationship, political influence and strategic security first, before the sale of arms could be sanctioned.

By the end of 1969 it was apparent that a British withdrawal from the remaining military facilities was necessary if Anglo-Libyan relations were to develop constructively. The Libyans had asked for negotiations for the speedy evacuation of British forces in a “moderately phrased note” on 29 October and on 8 December Anglo-Libyan negotiating teams met in Libya to discuss the withdrawal. “At the outset the Libyans made it clear that they were primarily interested in obtaining agreement to an early date for our final withdrawal”.<sup>110</sup> At DOPC on 12 December 1969 Stewart sought approval for a draft telegram of instructions to the Ambassador on the withdrawal of British forces, to be discussed in Tripoli on 13 December. The Libyans wanted an early and unconditional withdrawal of British troops to virtual exclusion of all other considerations and Ambassador Maitland had reported that there was “no chance of establishing a satisfactory relationship unless the British could give them a firm and early date for the completion of the withdrawal of our forces”.<sup>111</sup> To Gaddafi these military bases were, “reminders of Libya’s lack of “true independence”” and their evacuation “had been one of the main themes of public speakers since the start of the revolution”.<sup>112</sup> Stewart reported that Maitland was to propose 31 March 1970 for the withdrawal, on the understanding that the Libyans would afford their full cooperation and would agree to talks at an early date on all aspects of the relationship. Stewart wanted Anglo-Libyan relations to work in order to avoid a repeat of the mistakes made after the Egyptian revolution of 1952 when “prospects of a

---

<sup>109</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p. 145.

<sup>110</sup> Speaking notes, visit of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to Rome, 15-16 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>111</sup> OPD (69) 24 mtg, 12 December 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>112</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.140.

useful future relationship had been damaged by conceding points too little and too late in negotiations for a withdrawal which had already been agreed in principle". He wanted the Libyans to commit themselves publicly to discussions, which would continue after a date for withdrawal had been agreed. Defence Secretary Healey agreed it was right to keep dialogue with the Libyans open "to protect strategic, economic and commercial interests". He stressed that London should continue to make the "maximum possible use of such cards", that was the Libyans known desire to obtain supplies of British arms and associated training, to achieve an effective relationship with the RCC.<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile American-Libyan discussions on a withdrawal from Wheelus were to begin on 15 December.

The agenda for the Anglo-Libyan talks included the discussion of the settlement of financial claims outstanding since British forces evacuated Benghazi in 1967, withdrawal from Tobruk and El Adem, training and equipment of the Libyan armed forces and termination of the Anglo Libyan treaty.<sup>114</sup> In due course the negotiating teams only achieved an agreement on a withdrawal date for British forces of 31 March 1970, although the withdrawal was subsequently completed on 28 March in order to avoid any incidents. The American evacuation from Wheelus was set for 11 June 1970. The British kept in touch with the US during negotiations but made it clear to Washington that London would "not be deterred from doing what was best in our own interest".<sup>115</sup>

The Anglo-Libyan negotiations led to "signs that a promising relationship could possibly be developed". The Chiefs of Staff, somewhat disappointed, recognised that "we were having to give up an airfield in exchange for a rather intangible promise of friendship" but the episode was seen positively, as being the first time Britain was able "to form a satisfactory new relationship with an Arab nationalist government". Despite

---

<sup>113</sup> OPD (69) 24 mtg, 12 December 1969, CAB 148/91.

<sup>114</sup> COS 48 mtg, 27 November 1969, FCO 46/253.

<sup>115</sup> OPD (69) 24 mtg, 12 December 1969, CAB 148/91.

a perception of the Libyans as young, arrogant and fanatical, they were considered to be visibly friendlier than previous revolutionary regimes in Iraq or South Yemen. The Chiefs of Staff recognized that London's policy priority was still "to keep the Libyans on the side of the West" and the "most important strategic requirement was to keep the USSR out of Libya. Positive political and diplomatic action to this end should be maintained".<sup>116</sup>

On 18 December Stewart informed Cabinet on the progress made at the negotiations and that it had been agreed that, "on the understanding that the Libyans would give us their full assistance, that British troops would be withdrawn" on the proposed date. It now remained to be seen what the Libyan attitude would be over training facilities for British troops; and what line should be taken when considering further supplies of arms to Libya".<sup>117</sup> The successful negotiations for the speedy withdrawal of British troops led to the formation of two Anglo-Libya committees in connection with the withdrawal. Two other committees were formed, one looking into the RCC's future requirements for military equipment and training and another to discuss questions connected with defence relations such as the termination of the 1953 treaty and financial matters. This latter committee would then go on to discuss outstanding political matters.<sup>118</sup> In fact Anglo-Libyan relations improved slightly following the successful negotiations for the withdrawal of British troops and the arrival in Libya of British consignment of arms which had helped in those negotiations. On 18 December 1969 Wilson said that it was advisable for a report to be made to the Cabinet in the early months of 1970 on developments in negotiating a new relationship.<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> COS 49 mtg, 16 December 1969, FCO 46/253.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Speaking notes, visit of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 15-16 Jan to Rome, FCO 39/ 634.

<sup>119</sup> CC (69) 61 mtg, 18 December 1969, CAB 128/44.

In early January, Wilson, concerned with the progress of the Chieftain issue, inquired whether ministers would be discussing the question of the tanks at DOPC and making a decision.<sup>120</sup> He was reminded of his conclusions on 4 November that arms sales were reliant upon a number of developments in negotiating a relationship with the RCC and as yet Stewart was not in a position to bring the question of supply of Chieftains to DOPC.<sup>121</sup> Wilson, clearly committed to keeping the British position non-committal until such time as London's requirements were met on the nature and orientation of the RCC were met, agreed with this so long as there was "no element of a commitment, actual or implied, which ties our hands".<sup>122</sup>

On 4 January Ambassador Maitland raised with the RCC the formal termination of the 1953 treaty. Maitland also requested the Libyan Government to consider "giving form to the relationship".<sup>123</sup> Whilst the RCC's political programme remained vague and non-committal, Maitland later stated in a telegram to the FCO that British interests were ultimately best served by cooperation with the regime. Apart from the strategic "main aim" of preventing "Soviet penetration" or a "line" of revolutions, Maitland considered that British objectives should focus on securing oil to Britain and Western Europe, maintaining unhindered trade for British companies and ensuring Libya remained in the Sterling Area. Maitland was uneasy about the prospects for securing a working relationship as he considered negotiations were fundamentally undermined by the respective demands of both countries. What the British wanted was in the main "negative or abstract", possibly a reference to the ending of the treaty and the creation of a new relationship with attendant privileges for the British, whereas what Libya wanted was positive and material, a reference to the Chieftains and payment of the subsidy. A relationship satisfactory to both sides was bound to appear unequal or as

---

<sup>120</sup> C Everett, First Secretary FCO, letter, 8 January 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> C Everett to J Graham, Counsellor and Principal Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, January 19 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>123</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 5 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

Maitland termed it, a “give and take relationship” whereby “we give and they take”. The Ambassador urged a quick, flexible and sympathetic response to Libyan requests for help, especially in the field of education and training, both military and civilian. The Ambassador thought developments had come to a critical point. He believed that London must decide if Libya was sufficiently important to justify the special administrative and presentational effort necessary to meet Libyan requests for help.<sup>124</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office agreed with Maitland’s objectives but his obvious enthusiasm for taking a more amenable approach to the Libyans was considered problematic. Julian Walker, Assistant Head of the North Africa Department at the FCO stated that if Britain was to be the “giver” and Libya the “taker”, the reaction in Parliament and amongst the public would have to be taken into account and might be a problem.<sup>125</sup>

Further Anglo-Libyan talks were held on 21 January at the Ministry of Defence in Tripoli. These addressed the Chieftain tank and army equipment supplies, training facilities, and the role of the British missions, as well as the nature of the new Anglo-Libyan relationship.<sup>126</sup> Specifically, the talks were to explore possibilities for Anglo-Libyan cooperation and the attitude of the RCC to the Arab-Israel conflict, with a particular reference to the role they envisaged for the Libyan armed forces.<sup>127</sup> Ambassador Maitland also pursued the question of what use the Chieftain tanks would be put to and explained that the British wanted cooperation with Libya but needed to know the RCC’s attitude to the Arab-Israeli situation and whether any British supplied material would be transferred to the Middle East as the government would have to

---

<sup>124</sup> D Maitland to FCO, 5 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>125</sup> J Walker, Assistant Head of North Africa Department to P Hayman, 6 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>126</sup> D Maitland to FCO, 21 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>127</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 22 January 1970, FCO 39/658.

explain policy to the Commons and Parliament. The Libyan delegation side stepped the issue and referred Maitland to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.<sup>128</sup>

At a further meeting on 26 January the Libyans appeared to accept the political sensitivity of the Chieftain issue and stated that equipment supplied by Britain would only be used for Libya's defence.<sup>129</sup> Maitland emphasised again the military considerations of supplying arms into the Middle East. The Ambassador explained that Britain and Libya had a stake in peace in the region and an arms request made it necessary for the British to consider the "effect their response would have in the prospects for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East". They would have to consider not only the nature, capability and quantities of the weapons but the political relationship of the two countries and their relations with other countries should the Chieftains be delivered to Libya. The Ambassador, attempting to distance the Chieftain contract obligation to the new Libyan regime, said the legal basis for the contract was the 1953 treaty from which was derived the contract for the sale of arms signed in April 1969. The British regarded the treaty as defining the political relationship and thought it right to consider the framework and nature and extent in which there would be cooperation in the defence field in future. Major Jalud for the Libyans said the agreement and treaty were mere legalities and considered the British to be beating about the bush.<sup>130</sup>

The talks then turned to the last remaining British facilities which were the missions. As we saw earlier, under article three of the Treaty the "Parties" had agreed to "furnish to the other .....facilities" to "provide for their mutual defence". This gave rise to the "Agreement on Military Facilities" and under article one of the agreement

---

<sup>128</sup> Record, first session of talks on the Anglo equipment and training, Libyan MOD Tripoli, 21 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>129</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 27 January 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>130</sup> Record, second session of talks on the Anglo equipment and training, Libyan MOD Tripoli, 26 January 1970, FCO 39/634.

Libya and Britain agreed to their two armed forces working together “to secure efficiency in cooperation and uniformity” of training and equipment. This article allowed the British to promote weapons sales and gave rise to the creation of military missions in the country, operated by the British Army and the Royal Navy to facilitate joint training and attain “efficiency in co-operation”.<sup>131</sup> British policy sought to keep the missions because through them political influence and commercial advantage could be maintained. Their status depended on the treaty of 1953 but because the Treaty had effectively been annulled by the planned withdrawal from El Adem and Tobruk London considered negotiating an exchange of notes with the RCC. This would aim to separate the missions from the treaty, lengthening the legal basis for their presence in Libya.<sup>132</sup> Both during and after the revolution the British had been “handicapped by a lack of adequate intelligence” and the MOD considered creating an “unofficial” “defence attaché” and broadening the remit of the training missions that would be in place to supervise delivery of the Chieftain tanks.<sup>133</sup> The FCO felt political intelligence was what the British lacked rather than military intelligence and the present status of the missions provided adequate “intelligent use of eyes and ears” and this would continue to be their remit.<sup>134</sup> However, little progress in negotiation was made on the status of the missions. The Libyans appeared more concerned with the issue of the supply of Chieftains and had little interest in maintaining Western deployments. Wright states that “like many Libyans, Gaddafi saw the foreign bases not only as a continuing affront to Libyan independence but also as a potential springboard for the Western assault on neighbouring revolutionary Arab states”. The alleged coup attempt in December by disaffected officers had been revealed to the Libyan public just as the December talks for the withdrawal of British troops were to commence. Gaddafi had used the two episodes to claim the plotters wanted imperialism to continue in the guise of a Western presence in Libya and were planning the coup to obstruct

---

<sup>131</sup> Anglo-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, Cmnd 8914 (London, 1953).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Minute, MOD, 22 October 1969, FCO 39/414.

<sup>134</sup> Minute, FCO, 20 November 1969, FCO 39/414.

negotiations.<sup>135</sup> Therefore any planned British military presence appeared unlikely to be welcomed by the RCC.

The January talks deteriorated into a discussion of UN Resolution 242, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and Nigerian-Biafran issues. The Libyans countered British concerns over the supply of Chieftains by pointing out that Israel was receiving arms from the USA, Germany and Belgium and the Libyans needed arming for their own defence.<sup>136</sup> Tantalisingly, the Libyans stated that if the Chieftains were supplied there would be “no restrictions” on the extent to which “future relations in the defence field could develop”. In the Ambassador’s view the attempt to secure an Anglo-Libyan relationship in January failed because the RCC appeared preoccupied with the domestic situation and their desire to get Chieftains made them take the line that no future relationship would be possible unless Britain agreed to supply them. The Ambassador surmised that the Libyans were turning the Chieftain issue into one of confidence which could ultimately put British interests at risk.<sup>137</sup> He believed it would be best to supply the arms according to the April 1969 contract, except the number of Chieftains should be limited to two regiments and be delivered under detailed arrangements for their prospective use.<sup>138</sup>

The talks also floundered because the British had a close relationship with the previous regime and the RCC were highly suspicious of London’s motives. The RCC were also playing to their Arab Nationalist credentials and could not be seen to back down in the face of British and Western pressure. Furthermore, the RCC often appeared disorganised and lacking in direction and it was difficult for British policy makers to understand what Libyan intentions were. This was not helped by the fact that the RCC tended to speak through a number of representatives in the first twelve

---

<sup>135</sup> Wright, *Libya*, p.138.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 27 January 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>138</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 1 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

months of the regime and Cabinet reshuffles were frequent, particularly following the alleged attempted coup in December 1969. The British negotiating team was also tied by the Labour Government's concerns with supplying the Chieftain tank to Libya. Eventually British ministers recognised that they were not going to get the firm conditions or commitments from the Libyans on the use of tanks and on the form of a future relationship. Matters were not helped in the early months of 1970 as Gaddafi made frequent bellicose statements regarding the war on Israel, stating that he was willing to place arms purchased from France "at the disposal of the action for Arab liberation" and "Libya's armed forces will have the great honour to take part, with men and arms, in the battle of liberation of the Arab soil". Such statements did not reassure London that a delivery of Chieftains would not be used in the confrontation whilst also serving to confirm the very different strategic priorities of the RCC.<sup>139</sup>

At a meeting on 9 February 1970, Foreign Secretary Stewart and Defence Secretary Healey discussed the sale of Chieftains. Stewart said there were defence and commercial arguments for selling Chieftains but he was driven to the conclusion that the political and general arguments against were overriding. Healey agreed, especially as there was no guarantee that the Chieftains would produce a relationship with Libya that the British sought and there appeared little chance of "ring fencing" the tanks operational area outside of the Arab –Israeli conflict. However, the consequences of not selling the Chieftains would be that the Anglo-Libyan relationship would wither, unless there was any chance of satisfying the Libyans with something else such as alternative tanks. Stewart believed no substitutes would be acceptable to the Libyans. With an eye on the electoral calendar, Healey was concerned that even if the Government could be satisfied on safeguards surrounding the employment of the tank and supplied them, the British might find themselves in a difficult situation in the Middle East if the conflict restarted. In this case the British would be compelled to cut

---

<sup>139</sup> Notes, statements by Libyan leadership regarding the war on Israel, February 1970, FCO 39/658.

off further supplies to the Libyans, perhaps in an electoral period, so causing redundancies at the Leeds Arms factory, which would be highly unpopular.<sup>140</sup>

British arms supplies to Libya could also run contrary to British policy in securing peace in the Middle East. At the time Wilson had referred to a possible arms embargo of the Middle East in a statement to Premier of the Soviet Union, Kosygin.<sup>141</sup> Healey favoured stringing the Libyans along and this could be done if the British looked to be taking vigorous action on the mooted embargo. He also suggested that the Libyans could be persuaded to take the less advanced Centurion tank instead of Chieftains. Stewart agreed to look at the arms embargo tactic, although he was not hopeful that one could be achieved, and repeated that he thought that no substitutes would be acceptable to the Libyans. He agreed with Healey that they should work together in Cabinet on the matter.<sup>142</sup> Wilson showed continued interest in the Chieftain matter and on 10 February he inquired where policy stood on the sale. He introduced a new element into the debate by indicating concern that any sale of the Chieftains to Libya would be tantamount to giving the Soviet Union full specifications for the tanks.<sup>143</sup>

As we have seen, France was more easily satisfied by the strategic conditions attached to the sale of arms to Libya. On a visit to London in January 1970 the French Foreign Minister, Schumann, had emphasised to the British that France had taken some precautions that the Mirage jets would only be used for self defence and the aircraft could not be used from Iraq or Egyptian bases. The French had concluded that the Soviet Union would sell if Paris did not. The British reported the French attitude to Washington on 27 January 1970 and the Americans agreed with the logic of the

---

<sup>140</sup> Record of Conversation, M Stewart and D Healey, FCO, 9 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> J Graham, letter, 10 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

French decision to sell in order to keep the Soviets out.<sup>144</sup> The US State Department also gave no indication that they opposed Chieftain sales to Libya. The British Ambassador, John Freeman explained that “at working level their concern has been more about the possible effect on our common Western interests in Libya if we should decide to go back on the contract ...in these circumstance they would see a real risk of Libya turning to the Soviet Union”. Freeman considered the State Department would be quite pleased if the British supplied Chieftains to the Libyans in order to avoid the RCC turning to the East. The Ambassador believed that as Washington had agreed to sell further arms to the Israelis, then a British sale to Libya would balance the issue.<sup>145</sup>

Despite this advice the Labour Government would not move on the issue until they got firmer commitments about the tanks and movement had been made on the Anglo-Libyan relationship. The Government’s concern with the ramifications of supply did not go un-criticised and dissenting voices over policy emanated from individuals in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence and from the British Ambassador in Libya. Officials in the FCO criticised policy for being too firmly planted in the Arab-Israel dispute and not in an overall British policy for the region. Walker neatly summarised the contrary perceptions of Britain’s role and concerns in the Middle East: “If on the one hand HMG is convinced that the risk of a major Middle Eastern war is now so great and our efforts to prevent its occurrence so important, that this must take priority over other considerations then in my view we should decline to sell Chieftains to Libya”. But “If on the other hand ....we regard a Middle Eastern war...as something which is not much affected by British policy" then he felt the tanks ought to be sold.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Note, Sale of French arms, January 1970, FCO 39/656.

<sup>145</sup> Washington to FCO, 14 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

<sup>146</sup> J Walker to P Hayman, 20 February 1970, FCO 39/659.

The Labour Government appeared to consider the former perception to be partly the case, despite Britain's much reduced capacity to play any political or military role in the region. Peter Hayman, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the FCO believed the real issue was that ministers were more concerned over public and international opinion, but he was convinced the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would do everything to make sure other departments would not "write off" Libya, since to do so, "would be working against our own interests". Hayman indicated that elements of the FCO were concerned over the Government's handling of this issue and suggestions on Libyan policy, which were not contested by other departments, had "been shot down from the top" although it is not apparent what these were.<sup>147</sup>

The Ambassador in Libya considered that there was little evidence of a clear policy and the British seemed to be in Libya merely to collect debts on existing contracts. Maitland, referring to events during the revolution, claimed that "I have even had it said to me that some people in Britain have regarded Libya as the whore of the Arab world, whose body could be plundered for the gratification of our balance of payments". Maitland, rather disparagingly, believed that London's attitude to Libya was based merely upon recent events during the revolution and that: "one might conclude from the exchanges in Parliament that through some catalytic process our interests in Libya have now disappeared and this because two British women (out of a total community of 5000) were raped, because the only training areas we enjoyed outside our alliances and the commonwealth are no longer available, because the last British forces on African soil are being withdrawn, and because British companies are owed large sums of money". He wondered whether the Government had lost its political will to continue to hold onto British concerns. Maitland suggested that policy needed to have an "effective cutting edge" to "prevent damage to interests" and "if we opt out of Libya politically how can we prevent the Libyans from doing the same. If the Libyans opt out of their relationship with us there will be no possibility of our being able

---

<sup>147</sup> P Hayman to D Maitland, 27 February 1970, FCO 39/634.

to collect our debts. The whore will take her favours elsewhere".<sup>148</sup> Maitland later concluded that "maybe in the end .....we will have a rather exiguous relationship with revolutionary Libya" but he remained upbeat, remarking that businessmen from Britain were visiting Libya more and his embassy was not giving up on the issue.<sup>149</sup> Maitland, as well as the Chiefs of Staff considered that providing some Chieftains would help relations, suggesting that 120 tanks would not be unbalancing within the context of the Middle East and would be useful to the RCC only for prestige purposes.<sup>150</sup>

A draft policy paper by the Ministry of Defence and Foreign and Commonwealth Office dated 19 February 1970 was strongly in favour of supplying the Chieftains to Libya. The RCC were expected to survive and consequently there was no reason to delay any decision on the Chieftains which the Libyans would consider a negative response. Domestically there were also negative repercussions should the order not be confirmed. The rate of Chieftain production at the Royal Ordnance factory in Leeds had been built up to meet the Libyan order, in addition to British army requirements. It was concluded that if orders were cancelled after March 1970 then this would enforce an uneconomic rate of production resulting in redundancy and disruption at the factory. The document also pointed out that the Ambassador thought the Libyans would settle for fewer tanks. In any case Israel was already superior in tanks and a refusal to supply would be criticised by Egypt and other Arab states. The commercial reasons for supplying were stressed as failure to supply could possibly lead to Libyan discrimination against British business. In fact any failure to supply would put existing contracts under threat as well as the status of the military missions. There were also sound political reasons for selling and these were entwined with the trade issue. If the British supplied Chieftains then they would have settled the most contentious issue, with minimum damage to the relationship. The arms contracts and missions would then continue to give the British business. The RCC's policies were considered to be

---

<sup>148</sup> D Maitland to P Hayman, 19 February 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>149</sup> D Maitland to P Hayman, 10 March 1970, FCO 39/634.

<sup>150</sup> D Maitland to FCO, 1 February 1970, FCO 39/658.

still unformed and the British could thus influence them outside the defence field and preserve Libya's ties with the West. The paper attempted to diminish the wider military ramifications of supply to Libya in the Middle East and reaffirmed London's strategic aims that Libya should not fall under Soviet or other hostile influence and that Britain should continue to benefit economically.<sup>151</sup>

Whilst the paper appeared to provide a persuasive argument in favour of selling the tanks, Evan Luard, in correspondence with Foreign Secretary Stewart, thought it overstated the advantages of supplying. He considered the paper "partly propaganda" and was concerned, like the Cabinet, that supply of the tanks could undermine Middle East security. The deal could also be seen as a cynical exploitation of Britain's own commercial and political interests in the Arab world and the repudiation of "our fine words about arms control" especially at a time when even the USSR would not provide the advanced T62 tank to the Arabs. He believed the FCO paper would be unlikely to convince the DOPC.<sup>152</sup>

On 22 February 1970 Maitland held further talks with the Libyan Foreign Minister Busair. The Ambassador asked for Libyan comments on the 4 January request that Britain and Libya should look into the form that might be given to the Anglo-Libyan relationship after the ending of the 1953 treaty. Busair said this would now depend on Britain's attitude to the Arab-Israel issue and intimated that the British were better qualified to come up with suggestions. At the same time Maitland submitted to the Libyan Foreign Minister a draft exchange of notes which would have re-enacted verbatim all those articles of the military agreement relevant to the status of the missions and enable the British to maintain their remaining presence in the country.<sup>153</sup> It was evident to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that the Libyans regarded the British decision over the supply of Chieftains as a matter of confidence upon "which

---

<sup>151</sup> Draft report, Arms for Libya, 19 February 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>152</sup> E Luard to M Stewart, 23 February 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>153</sup> D Maitland to FCO, 23 February 1970, FCO 39/634.

our future relationship in the political, commercial and defence fields would depend".<sup>154</sup> In order to secure some sort of working relationship with the RCC, and following his conversation with Denis Healey, Michael Stewart told Wilson towards the end of March 1970 that policy should be to play the Chieftain contract long. The British would try to buy the Libyans off by offering an alternative package made up of the older main battle tanks, the Centurion and the Vickers. The Vickers tank substitute was considered an improvement on the Centurion replacement but together these tanks did not represent a major escalation or a disturbance of the military balance in the Middle East.<sup>155</sup> Wilson agreed with this approach and considered that there would be no difficulty in gaining ministers' agreement. Stewart explained that an offer of an alternative package would avoid the unfortunate consequences of refusing to supply. He considered it "better they become impatient than be turned away".<sup>156</sup>

At DOPC on 25 March 1970 it was decided that the Libyans were to be told a decision on Chieftains could not be taken at that time but that they would be offered the alternative tanks. Introducing into the Middle East "a powerful new weapon" held by no other Middle Eastern country as well as not being supplied to Israel was considered by Stewart to be "clearly wrong". The proposal was considered risky but would be better than simply refusing the tanks. Healey agreed on the grounds that if the Government did not offer some tanks, then Britain would lose existing contracts and wider repercussions were likely. He also considered that the political argument were in favour of supplying the revised order. Chancellor Jenkins said he accepted the policy because it was politically not possible to supply the tanks. He believed that the proposal was clearly much less advantageous to Britain economically and there was no firm guarantee that it would produce the desired effect. However, if the political argument was that the attempt was worth making he would not dissent from this. In

---

<sup>154</sup> Draft report, Arms for Libya, 19 February 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>155</sup> OPD (70) 9, Supply of arms to Libya, 25 March 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>156</sup> Draft PM/70/49, 23 March 1970, FCO 39/659.

discussion it was accepted that Chieftains would not be supplied “at the present juncture”.<sup>157</sup>

On 4 April 1970 Maitland informed the Libyans that the British would not be supplying Chieftains but would offer instead the Centurions and Vickers.<sup>158</sup> The Libyans did not make an immediate decision on the issue though initially Major Jalud, a senior member of the RCC and Deputy PM showed great interest in the alternative package.<sup>159</sup> However, the Libyans would eventually decide that they wanted Chieftains and if they did not get them they did not want other equipment. The acquisition of the advanced Chieftain tank would have prestige value for the regime, which was struggling to stabilise authority. Whilst undeniably in control, their domestic policies, in the eyes of the British diplomatic community, proved ineffectual or created new problems. Their performance was erratic and gave grounds for potential public discontent. However there was no sign of organised opposition and the main threat was from dissidence in the ranks of the RCC. A “comic development plan” had been published and emphasised a focus on agriculture. The Tripoli embassy considered Gaddafi “a sincere and simple man, woefully ignorant of the techniques of international discourse”. Increasingly, the regime voiced their opinions on the Palestine problem, giving the RCC an emotional issue to weld the Libyan people together whilst they transformed the country. Maitland believed the Libyans could only take part in the Arab-Israeli dispute in a token way for many years to come.<sup>160</sup>

Gaddafi used the evacuation of the bases on 31 March 1970 to play a nationalist card, stating that “these bases turned the good Arab lands of Libya into a base threatening Arab Nationalism in every part of the world”. He claimed the bases were

---

<sup>157</sup> OPD (70) 9 ,Supply of arms to Libya, 25 March 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>158</sup> FCO to Ankara, 5 April 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>159</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 5 April 1970, FCO 39/659.

<sup>160</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 25 April 1970, FCO 39/635.

used against the Egyptians in 1956.<sup>161</sup> Then he turned his attention to the oil companies in a similar vein stating “we have to battle with foreign oil companies as we did with foreign bases to achieve our political freedom”.<sup>162</sup> As part of a new “Libyanisation of society” Arab experts and advisors had flooded into Libya to work in the oil industry and administration. In October 1969 the oil minister Anis Ahmad Shtaiwi had ruled out nationalisation of the oil industry, but the regime cracked down on oil ventures and annulled a joint venture agreement between the American company Chappaqua Oil and state owned Lipetco at the end of October 1969. In December 1969, in a sign of further Libyan independence, the British *Daily Telegraph* reported that Algeria and Libya were to set up joint companies to work on all aspects of the oil industry. The oil relationship with foreign companies was also damaged by the increase in posted oil prices. Anxious to increase the Libyan share of oil wealth and score a political point, the RCC had set out to raise oil company defined “posted prices” on oil, which helped to calculate the income tax and royalties on producing operations, despite the fact that the Libyan Government received more oil revenue in 1969 than any other Arab or Middle East government.<sup>163</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office deduced that the RCC and its advisors had “set themselves to pursue radical and nationalistic policies against the oil companies, in an effort to wring even greater benefits out of them and to assert their sovereign authority over them” although Idris had himself put forward inflated claims. The Libyans also harassed the oil companies administratively.<sup>164</sup> Libya’s ultimate intentions to the oil companies were not clear, and there was some doubt as to how far these actions had been endorsed by the RCC. However, in April 1970 Gaddafi firmly declared his hostility to the oil companies claiming: “we have to battle with foreign oil companies as we did with

---

<sup>161</sup> FCO to Kampala, 2 April 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>162</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 9 April 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>163</sup> D Gore Booth, Second Secretary Tripoli to A Sindall, First Secretary FCO, 30 October 1970, FCO 67/256.

<sup>164</sup> Report, If BP or Shell looks to government at short notice for support, 27 May 1970, FCO 67/432.

foreign bases to achieve our political freedom".<sup>165</sup> Despite this rhetoric in May the RCC Deputy Prime Minister stated that the RCC only wanted the posted prices corrected and had no intention of expropriating or nationalising any of the oil companies. The British Government's involvement in the oil issue was minimal and policy was to leave the oil companies to make their own decisions on relations with the RCC, giving diplomatic support only when required.<sup>166</sup> The deterioration in relations between the oil companies and the RCC subsequently led to a decline in oil production.

Politically the regime drew closer to its Arab nationalist counterparts and further from British and Western influence. As mentioned earlier, between 11 and 13 January 1970 Egypt, Libya and Sudan had met in Cairo to consider the formation of joint committees to lay the foundations of cooperation and integration between their states. The Soviet and Egyptian threats were also inter-wined. In May 1970 there was speculation that Egypt was pressurising the Libyans to allow the Soviets to use facilities at Tobruk and in Cyrenaica, although Gaddafi in February and April had criticised both the US and Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean.<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 9 April 1970, FCO39/635.

<sup>166</sup> Report, If BP or Shell looks to government at short notice for support, 27 May 1970, FCO 67/432.

<sup>167</sup> E Clay, Third Secretary FCO, Letter, 27 May 1970, FCO 39/630.

## 6.6 Labour Leaves Office

Anglo-Libyan talks resumed on 8 June 1970 with a wide ranging agenda covering many of the issues raised but unresolved during the January talks. Topics included the status of the British military missions, the formal termination of the treaty, the future of bilateral relations and arms contracts. The Libyans had been pressing for a swift start to these negotiations and the Tripoli embassy believed the main motive behind this was mercenary. The RCC appeared concerned with the financial issues of Britain's alleged obligations under the subsidy, and the thorny issue of the BAC air defence contract. These issues were being used as negotiating tactics by the RCC to extract as much from the British as possible and served the regime in terms of anti-British propaganda. The BAC affair also appears to have been used by the RCC as a case study in the corruption of the Idris regime and by its very nature was highly emotive and complex to unravel. The RCC regarded the BAC problem as a political issue because they alleged London had heavily influenced the King to order the system. To an extent this was true as the Ministry of Defence had written twice to the Libyan Government at the time advising that the contract be signed and the RCC subsequently placed a number of prominent former members of the Libyan Government on trial for corruption involving the contract. The RCC wished to extricate themselves from the costly arrangement with BAC with the minimum of expense, although they had already lost money on the contract by defaulting on payments.<sup>168</sup> London was only willing to discuss the BAC contract in terms of the effect on Anglo-Libyan relations and not as a matter that the Government were directly responsible for.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 8 June 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>169</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 30 May 1970, FCO 39/635.

The intractable nature of negotiations so far led Ambassador Maitland to conclude that the deciding question was what each side would pay to begin relations afresh. He believed "our major objectives in Libya would be served by wiping the slate clean". Maitland made a number of recommendations which he hoped would maintain a residual British presence in Libya. He urged seeking a formal termination of the treaty and a Libyan agreement to an exchange of notes on the lines of drafts on the missions presented in February. He wanted to press the Libyans to agree to a military, advisory presence, and advised that British policy should aim to ensure that the treaty was not ended before agreement was reached on the status of such service personnel as were still in Libya. To secure these aims Maitland stressed that London should listen sympathetically to the Libyans over the BAC issue as well as on the issue of the subsidy.<sup>170</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that the aim on Libya and BAC was to keep things "on the move", although officials and the British Government held no responsibility for the contract. The Ambassador's other objectives were accepted.<sup>171</sup>

The Anglo-Libyan committee met on 15 June 1970 in Tripoli and discussed the military and naval missions, the very last elements of Britain's deployments in Libya. The Libyans stalled, claiming they needed to hear from their military on how many people were required in the missions. It was agreed to defer discussion of the future numbers and status of the military missions pending preparation of a report by the Libyan Chiefs of Staff. Major Jalud remarked that the RCC would find it difficult to agree to the retention of the pre-revolutionary privileges enjoyed by the missions. Any further progress on the treaty was also postponed because the Libyans said its formal termination could not go ahead until agreements on the missions and financial matters had been resolved.<sup>172</sup> Given the RCC's attitude towards any Western presence in Libya, it is more than likely that the position of the missions and financial matters were

---

<sup>170</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 9 June 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>171</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 11 June 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>172</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 18 June 1970, FCO 39/635.

being used by the RCC as a negotiating tactic to delay further discussions until the Chieftain issue was resolved.

The Chieftain and BAC orders again dominated the talks. The British offer to supply Vickers and Centurions in March had been rejected by the Libyans and Ambassador Maitland had instructed the Libyan Government that London was prepared to terminate the contract. On 17 June the Libyans took a different line reaffirming the need for Chieftains but adding a request for the rest of the material in the army equipment contract. This order would be dependent upon a satisfactory resolution of the BAC air defence scheme and of the Chieftain question. The Libyan line was that if the British promised “to supply Chieftains at a later stage, if the political situation in the Middle East improved” then they “might be able to buy” remaining equipment under new contracts. The Libyans said the Chieftains would demonstrate British confidence in the revolution and preserve relations with Libya. Major Jalud also made it clear “that a satisfactory settlement of the air defence scheme contract was the key to the future of Anglo Libyan relations”. The British responded that the BAC affair was strictly a matter for negotiation between BAC and the Libyans. Major Jalud stressed that the Libyans regarded the BAC air defence contract as a matter which involved the British Government because they had influenced the King to take it. He insisted the BAC issue be included in the agenda for any discussion. Maitland offered to act as bridge between the two sides but the Libyans put pressure on the British by requesting that the issue was resolved in two months.<sup>173</sup> Michael Hannam, Commercial Counsellor at Tripoli later stated that: “I realise the difficulties of this (BAC) matter....But the alternative is to allow Anglo-Libyan relations to be hampered for the foreseeable future by the commercial considerations of a single British company. I submit that the present is too delicate a time to allow ourselves to be

---

<sup>173</sup> Tripoli to FCO, 18 June 1970, FCO 39/635. Abdul Hamid al-Bakkoush’s trial featured the BAC air defence contract, illustrating how the contract was conceived and forced on the Libyans by London. Hannam was concerned by the effect on Libyan and Middle Eastern relations with the UK.

cornered is this way". He recommended BAC salvage some element of the contract if necessary by terminating the present arrangement swiftly in order to procure a new one.<sup>174</sup>

The Labour Government's attempts to secure an effective political relationship with the RCC and to maintain Britain's position in Libya ended on 18 June 1970 when Wilson's Government was replaced in the General Election by Edward Heath's Conservative administration. This had a small, but immediate consequence for Anglo-Libyan relations because Ambassador Maitland left to take up his role as press secretary to Heath and there was a hiatus in the continuing negotiations for a relationship. The election of a new government in Britain probably caused the Libyans to be even more cautious.<sup>175</sup> Alec Douglas-Home, the new Conservative Foreign Secretary, wrote to Gaddafi on 6 July stating that "HMG are most anxious to develop a new relationship with the Libyan Government...it is our firm intention to seek an early and honourable settlement of the various problems outstanding".<sup>176</sup>

The Libyans did not seem to be pressing too hard for a resolution and the "general atmosphere remained resigned, not to say docile".<sup>177</sup> Hannam outlined the consequences for British interests. He stated that following his experience during the previous six months he had been in Libya: "I am depressed by the way Libya seems to have developed no settled policy and in consequence is being pulled strongly into UAR orbit, while still being subject to Algerian attraction, especially in the oil front. While at the time they seem set on resisting Soviet blandishments. I cannot help but

---

<sup>174</sup> M Hannam to FCO, 24 June 1970, FCO 39/635.

<sup>175</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 31 June 1970, FCO 39/636.

<sup>176</sup> Douglas Home Letter to Gaddafi, 6 July 1970, FCO 39/636.

<sup>177</sup> M Hannam to RC Hope Jones, Head of Disarmament Department FCO, 16 July 1970, FCO 39/636.

feel disquiet at the long term prospects on that direction".<sup>178</sup> Unidentified Soviet equipment (later described as T54 and T55 tanks) arrived in Tripoli at the end of July.<sup>179</sup> These tanks effectively annulled the value of the Vickers and Centurion tanks which the British were offering. Hannam believed that "We must resign ourselves to watching Russian influence spread over the Libyan army or we must make further efforts to get into contact with these inexperienced subalterns with their predilection for instant government".<sup>180</sup> Russian military and sales involvement in Libya after the revolution had been limited despite London's concerns and had been thwarted by Nasser's support for the regime. The British Embassy in Cairo considered that Nasser had not let the Russians in to Libya and regarded the country as a "chasse gardee". He had given the Libyans many trainers, not only to get influence, but also to stop Libya going elsewhere and there was no evidence he had encouraged the Libyans to look to the Soviets for arms.<sup>181</sup>

Prospects for the future of Anglo-Libyan relations certainly seemed poor. Hannam believed: "beneath the calm (of negotiations) I have fears that there may be an undercurrent propelling us towards the rocks represented by the show trials promised by Gaddafi". Former Prime Minister Al Bakkoush's trial was an opportunity to demonstrate the corrupt nature of the former regime and this would involve criticism of the negotiations with BAC over the air defence contract. Hannam wanted to supply Chieftain tanks to the RCC and requested a ministerial visit to Libya as a show of

---

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* Hannam found the conditions in Libya extremely difficult to deal with as well, terming the RCC "frustrating, xenophobic, backward and suspicious" and was "tempted to leave them to stew in their own juice and to let them learn the hard way".

<sup>179</sup> Note, 28 July 1970, FCO 39/636.

<sup>180</sup> M Hannam to FCO, July 1970, FCO 39/636.

<sup>181</sup> Cairo to FCO, 10 February 1970, FCO 39/630.

good faith.<sup>182</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office considered that the heat had gone out of the talks because the Libyans were too tied up in their own affairs and would not entertain a ministerial visit or make an early decision on the Chieftains.<sup>183</sup>

From the summer of 1970 onwards the Libyans adopted a number of negotiating positions on outstanding issues which seemed targeted at extracting as much from the British as possible. On 18 August Hannam was summoned to the Libyan Foreign Ministry and asked for the earliest possible date for the resumption of talks. However, the Libyans requested that the leaders of both the Libyan and British sides should be of comparable position and rank.<sup>184</sup> On 9 September the frustration of dealing with the Libyans' negotiating tactics led Alec Douglas-Home to state that "this is ridiculous" on seeing the telegram about the ranks of negotiators. He stated that "I am more and more doubtful if it worth trying to humour these people" and exclaimed that "the time has come to tell the Libyans where they get off".<sup>185</sup>

At the end of September Hannam was summoned to see Jalud, who again brought up the BAC issue but claimed he was willing to compromise by buying some of the equipment manufactured by BAC. Hannam sensed that Jalud had moved away from just wanting all of Libya's money back and was willing to make a financial settlement, but BAC needed to be brought to the table. Libya had threatened to publish its allegations that BAC had inflated prices but the company remained rooted to its letter

---

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 31 July 1970, FCO 39/636.

<sup>184</sup> Note, August 1970, FCO 39/636. Hannam believed the Libyans considered that London no longer had anything to offer or that a more senior official would get things done on a visit and that's why they had set the demand of equivalent officials.

<sup>185</sup> Note, 9 September 1970, FCO 39/636. RC Hope Jones, letter, 7 September 1970, FCO 39/636.

of contract.<sup>186</sup> The next round of talks began in London on 2 November and the Libyan delegation was led by Major Jalud. He began the talks with a bellicose statement on BAC corruption and how the British Government was entirely responsible for the affair and the Chieftain problem. He said the British owed £3.25 million a year from 1965 for the facilities enjoyed at the bases, a reference to the unresolved issue of the subsidy, and all other outstanding issues had to be sorted out before movement could occur on Anglo-Libyan relations.<sup>187</sup>

The nature of the Anglo-Libyan negotiation process had become a case of merely demonstrating established positions. Little had been achieved as the BAC contract was unresolved, the Chieftain supply was under review, and the treaty had not been formally ended, whilst the thorny issues of Libyan demands for subsidy compensation remained. The only movement was on the RCC's decision to no longer maintain the missions' diplomatic or treaty status. The headquarters of the military mission in Benghazi were closed on the 24 July and personnel transferred to Tripoli.<sup>188</sup> All that was left of Britain's Libyan facilities was an unsecured military administrative presence. Washington had broken up a military advisory group in Tripoli that they had maintained but still had a military assistance agreement with the Libyans which needed terminating.<sup>189</sup>

In January 1971 the Annual Review for Libya from the new British Ambassador, Peter Tripp, summarised the condition of Libya and the Anglo-Libyan relationship which had deteriorated considerably. The RCC had achieved a series of "negative, and mostly xenophobic, achievements" which had had "deleterious effect on the Libyan economy". The RCC felt they had a "key role to play in the Arab-Israeli conflict"

---

<sup>186</sup> M Hannam to FCO, 23 September 1970, FCO 39/637.

<sup>187</sup> FCO to Tripoli, 3 November 1970, FCO 39/637.

<sup>188</sup> Benghazi Despatch, No 10/13, 28 July 1970, WO32/19318

<sup>189</sup> Record of Anglo American Talks, State Department, USA, 18 November 1970 FCO 39/620.

through a “Gaddafi Plan” and this led to an RCC tour of the Middle East in May and June 1970. Anglo-Libyan relations had “not prospered”. Anglo-Libyan negotiations proceeded on settling problems outstanding from the previous treaty and British exports declined, mainly due to stagnation in the Libyan economy. In 1969 Libya accounted for £42million of British exports and Britain was the third largest exporter into Libya with transport equipment and other machinery of great importance. This had declined to £18.7 million in the first nine months of 1970. Whilst the British naval mission maintained a good working relationship with the Libyans and the military mission had just two representatives, hopes of an entirely new relationship appeared bleak. The Ambassador concluded that Libya deserved a “better government”.<sup>190</sup> Relations worsened in due course when, in 1971, Gaddafi nationalised foreign banks and in December of that year nationalised the Libyan holdings of BP. US oil interests were also nationalised, Bunker Hill losing their investments in 1973.<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Libya, Annual Review for 1970, 20 January 1971, FCO 39/801.

<sup>191</sup> G. Simons, *Libya: The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke/New York, 1996), pp. 201,316.

## 6.7 Conclusion

From September 1969 the Labour Government attempted to forge a new relationship with the RCC. The remaining Libyan facilities served no strategic purpose as the East of Suez role had been wound down and they had no practical military purpose in Britain's NATO role in the Mediterranean. Given the Arab Nationalist nature of the RCC the deployments and defence guarantee were also superfluous. The revolution was interpreted, by British policy makers, as a threat to British interests as well as those of the West, so placing the revolution in the strategic perspective of the Cold War. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office urged swift recognition of the new regime feeling that British and Western interests stood a better chance of survival by doing so. The FCO's line was promoted by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and agreed to readily in Cabinet.

Thereafter the Labour Government endeavoured to secure a relationship with the new regime. Michael Stewart was anxious that progress on this should not stall as it had done with Egypt in 1952. The Government hoped to achieve its goal by utilising arms contracts as a basis for negotiation and to retain access to El Adem, training grounds and military missions. When the Libyans requested complete withdrawal the British Government acceded readily but thereafter continued to use the arms contracts as a negotiating tactic to create a new relationship, which would enable London to maintain influence. A review of the whole Anglo–Libyan relationship that had existed before 1969 was initiated. The Government believed the key to creating a relationship was to understand the attitude and intentions of the regime, gauging the implications for wider British concerns which in turn would enable them to determine their own position.

A successful review of the existing relationship and creation of a productive new one proved to be a failure. This was due to the stand-off between the two governments over the major element of the arms contracts, that of the Chieftain tank. The Labour Government saw the supply of the Chieftain within the context of Middle Eastern security and Britain's interests in the region. Initially Stewart called for a delivery of Chieftains to Libya to be honoured given the concern that the Soviet Union and Egypt sought to gain influence in Libya. However, the Government decided that the RCC's attitude towards the Arab-Israeli conflict was too important an issue to ignore when considering supply. London had an economic and political stake in maintaining peace in the Middle East and concerned over the strategic alignment of the Libyan regime, feared destabilising the region if Chieftains were provided. Ministers chose to make the order reliant on developments in the review of Anglo-Libyan relations, postponed the delivery and then strung out the negotiations with the Libyans with the offer of other tanks.

The Government's policy position on export was reached at DOPC and was essentially a compromise that stalled a decision because ministers were divided on the issue. The situation is illuminated upon by Crossman's observation that foreign policy was only debated at DOPC when Foreign Secretary Stewart and Wilson disagreed and this was a rare event.<sup>192</sup> Stewart has been described by Defence Secretary Healey as lacking "the drive and the imagination" the job of Foreign Secretary required but he was loyal to Wilson.<sup>193</sup> However, Wilson was averse to letting ministers take a decisive position on any issue that had the potential to split the government and would have repercussions for Labour at any future election. Instead, given that Wilson played a role in the unresolved debate on Chieftains, frequently showing interest in the sale whilst warning against export of the tank until Britain's demands were met as well as extensively summing up the DOPC debate on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1969, reinforces Wrigley's observation that Wilson "escorted his Cabinet

---

<sup>192</sup> Crossman, *The Diaries*, Vol. 3, p 787.

<sup>193</sup> D. Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1990), p.297.

colleagues” whilst attempting to avoid a major issue of principle.<sup>194</sup> The issue of supply was compounded by ministers who believed they had a role to play in bringing a peaceful resolution to the conflict through Four Power Talks and mooted international arms embargos, illustrating that the government considered wider regional and inter governmental issues within the Chieftain debate. The problem was further complicated by the possible sale of Chieftains to Israel, which had the potential to cause economic and political repercussions for Britain’s position in the Middle East.

In due course London failed to be reassured by the RCC over their intentions towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. In early 1970 Gaddafi declared “that his greatest ambition was to see a free, sovereign and independent Palestine” and he continued to express his utter hostility to Israel throughout the year. In June he was “ready to prepare the Arab world for the annihilation of Israel”. Gaddafi toured Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Egypt to propose a grand strategic plan for co-ordinated military action.<sup>195</sup> The Labour Government remained committed to the policy on supply from November 1969, although their search for a relationship with the RCC was increasingly unlikely to prove productive given the Arab Nationalist nature of the regime in Tripoli and the RCC’s mounting involvement in the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. That the Labour Government remained steadfastly focused on creating a relationship was possibly a result of a misinterpretation of the RCC’s political position as well as a miscalculation on the likelihood of achieving a result, especially after negotiations for the withdrawal from El Adem and Tobruk which seemed to bode well for the future. However London’s perceptions were in part due to the position taken by the RCC.

The RCC were determined to acquire the Chieftain and made progress on the relationship entirely dependent upon its delivery. Tripoli’s demands were then raised

---

<sup>194</sup> C. Wrigley, “Now you see it, now you don’t: Harold Wilson and Labour’s foreign policy 1964-1970”, in R. Coopey, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Wilson Governments 1964- 1970*, (London, 1993), pp. 129-130.

<sup>195</sup> Wright, *Libya*, pp.156-157.

by demanding a resolution of the BAC and subsidy issue. Creating a new relationship was not helped by the new, inexperienced regime in Tripoli who took confusing and often contradictory stances on issues and grew demonstrably more Arab Nationalist in their rhetoric as months passed. Over time it became clear that the RCC did not subscribe to maintaining a shared strategic position with London, given their Pan Arab, anti-Western political orientation and proclamations of support for the Palestinian cause. However, the Libyans were amenable to negotiations with the British even a year after the revolution of September 1969 and this held out the possibility that London could secure British interests in Libya although these talks proved fruitless. Whatever the ultimate aims of the RCC were over maintaining negotiations, the new government in Tripoli were not in a position to be seen to be reaching an agreement with the British given the strong former relationship between London and Idris. The RCC appeared little inclined to recreating that relationship given that they put on trial those involved in arms-contracts with the British and openly proclaimed their own anti-imperialist credentials whilst condemning Western influence in the Arab world.

Meanwhile the FCO considered the Government's policy on the Chieftain issue to be too firmly planted in the Arab-Israeli conflict and policy was criticised by British diplomatic representatives as piece-meal and confused. The Ministry of Defence drew similar conclusions. France and the USA showed little concern with the wider ramifications of supply and Labour's appreciation of the military threat the tanks posed was probably exaggerated, as the Chieftains were unusable without British technical support. The Government's attitude to not supplying the Chieftain tank certainly cannot be explained on ethical grounds, although the Government was bound by a 1967 ministerial agreement on supplying arms to the Middle East that prohibited the sale of offensive weapons, although even this was not thought to apply to Chieftains sold to the Idris regime.<sup>196</sup> The Labour Government's record on the supply of military equipment showed little ethical concern and ministers appeared more interested in

---

<sup>196</sup> Brief, DS 13 May 1968, DEFE 11/632.

the consequences for British trade should supply of the Chieftain contract not be honoured.

In conclusion, the Labour Cabinet's focus on the wider implications of Chieftain supply, the deadlock between ministers over the supply to Libya and the Government's commitment to determining the attitude and intentions of the RCC obstructed London's aim of achieving a relationship with Tripoli and maintaining interests in the country. The RCC's confusing diplomatic approach and more pronounced radicalisation and vocal Arab Nationalist stance from September 1969 stymied any progress on creating a new relationship. The two countries were now politically opposed. The impasse in negotiations led to the failure to achieve successful termination of the treaty and a continued residual British presence in terms of missions and of British training rights. The preservation of Britain's economic position was also irrevocably compromised. Finally, the deadlocked negotiations led to a failure to secure Libya strategically for the West. Anglo-Libyan relations on a political, strategic and economic basis broke down over the months following the revolution of September 1969 and were to grow worse over the next thirty years.

## 7 General Conclusion

During the first half of the 1960s the British prized the Anglo-Libyan relationship because it gave them access to military facilities that played a role in an East of Suez defence strategy. However, as London shifted strategic priorities the Libyan deployments became less valuable for that purpose. Instead the military presence was increasingly prized for its economic and defence training value and for maintaining British and Western political influence in the Arab world and eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile Libya developed economic and political independence from London. The King, along with his ministers continued to value the relationship with the British because it afforded security against threats from the Arab Nationalist regimes in Egypt and Algeria. Throughout this period the core of the Anglo-Libyan relationship remained the 1953 treaty.

This study has shown that from 1964 to 1970 the Anglo-Libyan relationship reflected Britain's changing foreign and defence policy and has added to an appreciation of this subject. Initially, the Labour Government had been committed to a policy based on a world role for Britain, with no more a vocal supporter than Harold Wilson himself. Libya's strategic role was reaffirmed in the Anglo-Libyan review during 1965 although the British withdrawal from Tripoli went ahead and a withdrawal from Benghazi was scheduled for some time in the near future. However, the strategic value of the facilities was questionable given the Sudanese restrictions on over-flying. From late 1965 until 1969 London withdrew from a strategic policy based East of Suez, and developed a new role focused on Europe and NATO responsibilities. The Wilson Government sought further cuts in the Libyan deployments as part of this process. The pace of withdrawal was tempered by the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence, who counselled on the importance of maintaining facilities to preserve the relationship with the King, retain British economic and training privileges and provide a suitable presence to fulfil the defence plan for Libya. A residual presence was

maintained at El Adem and Tobruk and the 1965 planned withdrawal from Benghazi was repackaged into the wider strategic contraction. In order to continue to honour the defence commitment to Idris military support from Washington was sought and a Libyan contribution to defence mooted, but neither of these initiatives proved successful.

The 1966 Defence White Paper signalled an end to British overseas military bases, although officials continued to stress the importance of the Libyan facilities in securing London's interests in Libya. With these considerations in mind the Foreign Office and British diplomatic representatives in Libya were instrumental in attempting to forestall the planned withdrawal from the Benghazi base, but British domestic economic difficulties and ministerial commitments thwarted these plans. Ministers after the Six Day War in June 1967 were eager to take advantage of the Libyan withdrawal request by reaching immediate agreement to withdraw the deployments. In due course they were dissuaded by civil servants who re-emphasised the benefits of the facilities, although the strategic redundancy of the deployments was finally accepted.

This thesis has also developed and broadened knowledge of the Anglo-Libyan relationship during the 1960s, which has been a neglected area of study and builds on previous work focused upon the 1950s. Analysis has shown that the relationship had grown in importance as the oil economy in Libya boomed. The British were eager to exploit this opportunity for exporting goods, services and military hardware, which in turn would benefit the British economy. The Libyan oil market was important to Britain's domestic and industrial development as well as that of Western Europe and therefore was of strategic as well as economic importance. London was especially keen to reduce the drain on sterling expenditure which foreign deployments incurred and exports were duly encouraged. The British facilities, particularly the missions, acted as unofficial arms exporters and technical support centres and enabled the British to coordinate and run joint training activities with the Libyan armed forces. Maintaining these facilities and the treaty reassured the King of Britain's commitment

to his regime and enabled London to retain political influence. Idris and his government reciprocated by demonstrating a preference for British arms and services. The record on Anglo-Libyan relations in the 1960s has also added to an understanding of British foreign policy, bringing out the importance of economic considerations and priorities in policy formulation.

Turning to the Libyan Government's approach to the relationship, during the 1960s Tripoli played a "nationalist card" by condemning the deployments from time to time, to assuage popular discontent. However, they remained resolutely committed to an amicable and productive relationship with London and were content to have a British presence in the country. The King, avowedly pro-British, hoped to maintain a significant foreign military deployment in his country to secure his own and Libya's security. The 1967 withdrawal request led only to the removal of the Benghazi garrison, which had been sanctioned in 1965.

In January 1968 the Anglo-Libyan treaty relationship was reviewed and reaffirmed. British policy sought to encourage Libyan autonomy in political and defence issues; a concept termed "Libyanisation", and looked to support this through the sale of arms and increased trade. London hoped the Libyans would play a more pronounced strategic role in the region, possibly building an economic bloc with other countries and taking greater control of their own defence. Britain's less obtrusive and more diplomatic approach, but still with some military element, was in keeping with other disengagements in the Middle East and until the revolution Anglo-Libyan relations appeared to be following a similar diplomatic model that Britain had with other traditionalist Arab leaders.<sup>1</sup> However, the Libyans continued to raise concerns over perceived threats from Algeria and Egypt and appeared reluctant to take full responsibility for their own security.

---

<sup>1</sup> J.W.Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International policy* (Manchester, 2003), p.109.

Withdrawal from East of Suez, confirmed in 1968, formally ended the strategic role of the British presence in Libya although the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office continued to promote the importance of maintaining the relationship, given the emerging Soviet threat in the Mediterranean. The Labour Government accepted this conclusion, and although the facilities played no specific military role in NATO strategy, they continued to reassure the King and allowed the British to retain political influence. The British remained treaty bound to the defence of Libya and the facilities provided for this defence purpose. This commitment had potentially wider strategic consequences for defence planning given the Soviet Union's political and military support for Egypt.

From 1964 to 1969 policy on Libya was strongly influenced by permanent officials in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. Decisions were taken as a result of the Ambassador's recommendations tempered and considered in light of wider foreign, defence and economic policy. Advice took into account Britain and Western strategic security interests East of Suez and American diplomatic pressure, threats from Arab Nationalism and Soviet involvement in the region as well as Libya's defence concerns. British interests in Libya such as the Anglo-Libyan political relationship, the defence commitment, trade, oil, and sterling finances were also considered. Final decisions were made at DOPC or at Cabinet and policy recommendations by officials were generally accepted, such as the 1965 Defence Review and the May 1968 decision to maintain a residual Libyan commitment.

Whitehall also promoted department agendas with regard to the Anglo-Libyan relationship. For example the Ambassador sought, along with the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office, to promote a continued deployment in Benghazi in 1966, although financial pressures on the defence budget undermined this campaign. Officials, to a degree, undermined the Labour Government's position on withdrawing from overseas deployments. The Ministry of Defence promoted the military value of the training arrangements and the Foreign Office emphasised the value of the deployments to the

relationship. Officials persuaded Labour ministers to abandon requests for a financial contribution to maintain the military commitment and not to withdraw unilaterally from Libya given the 1967 request. The Foreign Office also steered policy in 1965 when seeking a replacement for the subsidy, by advising against the formalisation of any new arrangement. There were few occasions when ministers took personal initiative on Libya before 1969, although they were involved in high level talks when seeking a military contribution from the US to Libyan defence costs. When ministers initiated policy ideas, as in Healey's request that the Libyans fund the facilities, this was undermined by the force of argument of officials. The Foreign Office and the MOD also drew upon the importance of Anglo-Libyan trade and Libya's strategic significance in the Mediterranean in 1968 in order to stress the value of King Idris' regime to Britain and the West and to retain the relationship as it stood.

Whilst there were some interdepartmental rivalries and debates over Libyan policy, the importance of Libya in terms of trade and the valuable training facilities led to a consensus on policy between the Foreign Office and the MOD. However, the Treasury continued to push for greater cuts in British overseas defence expenditure and the reduction of Libyan facilities. The Treasury was especially concerned by the Ministry of Defence's request for building works at El Adem in 1969. The Libyan experience was not unlike that of the withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore where a debate occurred between the political and economic departments in Whitehall. The political departments argued that withdrawal had to be carefully managed so as not to lose allied cooperation or contribute instability to the region. The Treasury was concerned that a continued capability in the region would be costly.<sup>2</sup> That said policy on Libya was generally approached in a pragmatic and measured way. For example, in 1967 a full withdrawal from Libya was not in British interests due to the fact that the treaty obligation had little time left until expiry in 1973 and London was eager to continue to exploit the military presence. The Foreign Office often played the situation as it developed, evidenced by the informal acceptance of a vague "technical"

---

<sup>2</sup> P.I. Pham, *Ending East of Suez* (Oxford, 2010), p. 192.

replacement for the subsidy in 1965 and securing the future of the El Adem facilities in 1967 by avoiding the issue during negotiations. This approach generally showed a lack of creativity or boldness, as little consideration was given to a post Idris regime or what to do after the expiry of the treaty, other than proposing policy options that would make the British more amenable to a successor regime. The Foreign Office Minister of State Goronwy Roberts' visit to Libya in 1968 and his call for less emphasis on military trade with Tripoli failed to develop a new approach.

Events from 1964 to September 1969 illustrated the "shared tradition" of mutual strategic interests that permeated Anglo-Libyan relations during the period. The Libyan facilities had supplemented the British East of Suez strategy until 1965 and provided for the defence of Libya, assuaging King Idris and his government's fears of Arab Nationalist attack. As London wound down the East of Suez strategy, British economic ties and training opportunities in the country came to the fore as the chief motivations for maintaining a residual presence. Maintaining a pro-Western regime in Libya against Soviet and Egyptian encroachment also became a priority, in order to secure interests through a continued close Anglo-Libyan relationship.

This study has offered an alternative perspective upon the strategic withdrawal from East of Suez. Considering Petersen's contention that Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez was ideologically driven, this study of the Anglo-Libyan experience from 1964 to 1969 shows a strong commitment to ending Britain's overseas commitment in Libya for financial reasons. It is not apparent in the documentary evidence that there was an over-riding ideological commitment to withdrawal from Libya. Certainly the Labour Government showed the political determination to pursue reductions in East of Suez deployments but the Government, as Petersen observes, was "flexible in the ways and means the decision was implemented" throughout the region and this was also the case in Libya. The Labour Government was strongly influenced by the Foreign Office and MOD to remain at El Adem and Tobruk, at least until the expiry of the treaty obligation. Petersen's other contention that little consideration was given from

1964 to 1968 “to explore any political or economic opportunities to remain” in areas where Britain deployed forces was not the case in Libya. Officials were aware of the value of remaining and the benefits of doing so were frequently stressed in policy documents.<sup>3</sup> Through a limited military presence London maintained training privileges as well as trading and political influence in Libya and was content to allow the deployments to remain until the treaty expired for these very reasons. However, that said, little consideration was given to forward planning for the period after the ending of the treaty in 1973. The continued value of a presence to Britain’s training, economic and political position was emphasised by the Labour Government’s determined search for a relationship with the RCC after 1969 and commitment to maintaining a residual presence in the form of the military missions.

After the revolution the Labour Government was eager to protect the British position in Libya and showed concern with a potential strategic threat emerging within the context of Cold War security. Ministers sought to develop a pro-Western regime in Tripoli by building a new relationship and preventing a political vacuum which could be exploited by the Soviet Union. As a result the RCC was recognised swiftly as the legitimate government of Libya. Michael Stewart was particularly anxious that mistakes were not made in negotiating a new relationship and referred to the consequences of failed negotiations with the Egyptians in 1953. Michael Stewart outlined Britain’s key interests in Libya being political and strategic, economic and military, (in terms of training). However as the RCC secured their position their ever more pronounced Arab Nationalist credentials did not bode well for Western interests. The RCC no longer had an interest in the Anglo-Libyan relationship as it had previously been, given the very different political priorities of the regime. The Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence sought to negotiate a continued role for the missions and retain training privileges by using existing arms contracts, which would

---

<sup>3</sup> T. Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East 1961-1969, A Willing Retreat* (Eastbourne/2009), p. 74.

allow London to maintain some political influence, steer the regime to the West and exploit the Libyan economy. A swift agreement to withdraw from El Adem and Tobruk, as a result of the RCC request in October 1969, was followed by a continued attempt to negotiate a new relationship to preserve Britain's position in Libya including training rights, joint training of the Libyan military and maintenance of the missions. This was to be done through a comprehensive review of the existing relationship and by using existing arms deals to achieve results. This approach was undermined by the Labour Government's concern over exporting the Chieftain tank to an Arab Nationalist regime which they considered could escalate the conflict in the Middle East. London had important economic and political interests in the region, particularly in terms of trade and oil, and therefore a stake in maintaining peace there. The RCC made the creation of a new relationship dependent upon the supply of Chieftains. Anglo-Libyan relations broke down completely and British training rights, missions, contracts and economic interests were all lost as Tripoli turned increasingly Arab Nationalist in political orientation and the strategic environment of the region moved further away from the West.

The Chieftain tank episode illustrates the Labour Government's appreciation of wider foreign policy implications, in this case the Middle East and peace in the region. This coincides with an observed "moral" element in Labour foreign policy: "The prime minister shared the grandiose notions of the Labour Left, believing in the moral weight of British foreign policy to bring good to the world".<sup>4</sup> Ministers' interest in Four Power Talks and mooted arms embargos illustrated a focus on Britain's continued diplomatic role in the Middle East despite London's military decline there. However, such idealism has to be balanced with a pragmatism evidenced in the issue of Labour's arms deals to Nigeria, South Africa and Greece. Prime Minister Wilson's concern with Britain's wider foreign policy priorities also reinforces the interpretation that he held onto old fashioned notions of Britain's international grandeur. Wilson believed that

---

<sup>4</sup> H. Parr, 'Britain, America, East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy, 1964-1967', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 404.

“Britain had an international duty” and “that Britain should play its part bringing stability to the far corners of the globe”.<sup>5</sup> Wilson was not interested in reducing Britain’s influence in the world but it has been noted that he chose an approach based on Britain’s available capabilities. Saki Dockrill recognises that Wilson was committed to economic strength and diplomatic intervention but not military intervention and from the mid-1960s instruments of power were shifted from facilities and military forces to the use of economic, financial and technological pressures.<sup>6</sup>

The application of these principles was clearly demonstrated in the Labour Government’s approach to Libya from 1964. The lessons of the Six Day War and the decision to not intervene in the revolution demonstrated that military action was no longer an appropriate or available option. From 1968 the British Government encouraged the Libyans to take more responsibility for their defence and to work towards regional cooperation as the expiry date of the treaty neared. Healey urged this upon the Libyans when he visited the country in 1968. The Wilson Government also sought an internationalist and interdependent approach to resolving external problems, to maximise Britain’s power and influence. The application to the Common Market was part of this policy as was the role of Britain at the UN, in the Four Power Talks and the mooted arms embargo over the conflict in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> This approach was a revisionist and positive one and fits a perceived move from “hard” to “soft” power that Anne Deighton recognises in the earlier Macmillan years. This was an attempt to maintain “Britain’s status in the world, despite increasingly difficult financial burdens” through membership of organisations like the Common Market, technological advances and economic growth, policies that were supported by Wilson

---

<sup>5</sup> G. O’Hara and H. Parr, ‘Introduction: the Fall and Rise of a Reputation’, *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 479, 483.

<sup>6</sup> S. Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?*, (Basingstoke/New York, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Parr, ‘Britain America and East of Suez’, 403-421.

but met varying degrees of success.<sup>8</sup> Healey also wished to remould the role of British foreign and defence policy. David Greenwood, economic advisor to the Government from 1966 to 1967 states that Healey reflected “a desire to redefine the role...more becoming for a medium power...in reduced economic circumstances”.<sup>9</sup> However the commitment to internationalism and interdependence had consequences for the export of Chieftains to Libya because to export would run against the grain of policy in the Middle East where the British sought a resolution through diplomacy and international agreement.

Returning to the Labour Government’s record on Libya, until 1969 Cabinet decision making appeared to be generally consistent and united; most ministers showing general support for the advice from officials. The only occasion when the Libyan issue became contentious in Cabinet was after the revolution and over the supply of Chieftains to Libya, which was further compounded by a mooted delivery to Israel. The Prime Minister effectively and not uncharacteristically, given his tactical nature in Cabinet allowed a decision on the issue to be stalled, concerned with the implications of supply and the potential fractious effect of the issue in Cabinet. This was typical of Wilson’s management of Cabinet decisions. As Frankel has stated, Wilson was a master of avoiding difficult decisions and postponing them as long as possible. Wilson’s obsession was with consensus although this could be considered an excuse for indecision.<sup>10</sup> As a result Cabinet policy on exporting the Chieftain was fixed on the Government’s stipulation that the attitude and intentions of the RCC be revealed first. Thereafter officials’ influence upon policy diminished significantly. Diplomats and the

---

<sup>8</sup> A. Deighton, ‘British Foreign Policy Making the Macmillan Years’, in W. Kaiser and G. Staerck (ed.), *British Foreign Policy 1955-1964, Contracting Options*, (Basingstoke/New York, 2000), pp.16-17.

<sup>9</sup> A. Greenwood in “The decision to withdraw from East of Suez”, Seminar held 16 November 1990, (Institute of Contemporary History, 2002. Available from <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/witness/esuez/>), 17.

<sup>10</sup> J. Frankel, *British Foreign Policy 1945-1973* (London, 1975), p. 31.

Foreign Office were often frustrated by the policy focus on the supply of the Chieftains to the detriment of Britain's political and economic future in Libya. Diplomats accused policy of appearing to lack direction and being too firmly focused on the strategic concerns of the Middle East and on making money. This reinforces the accusation that the Labour Government often failed to articulate a strategy and "indecision and apparent desire to face all ways at once meant that the government did not make choices that needed to be taken".<sup>11</sup> However in mitigation, the Labour Government did remain committed to the policy decided at DOPC on 4 November 1969. Furthermore their negotiating position was not helped as they were dealing with an inexperienced and over-enthusiastic Libyan Government composed of committed Arab Nationalists who had little inclination or reason to be seen to conclude any agreement with London. This was further compounded by the contrary stances on developments in the relationship the RCC took from September 1969 onwards.

This work has enabled further understanding of the conduct and process of foreign policy decision making in the Labour Government from 1964 to 1970. Young has claimed that Labour's foreign policy had been "achieved more by muddle and a collapse of alternatives than any long-term vision". However, the policy record on the withdrawal from East of Suez and Anglo-Libyan relations from 1964 to the revolution of 1969 show a commitment to a strategy of withdrawal as part of the defence reviews of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> This strategy had been tempered by considerations of Britain's growing trade interests in Libya and the need to maintain political influence with the monarchy. In turn this was supplemented by a determined policy to encourage the Libyan regime to build their military and security forces and play a greater defence role in security in the Mediterranean. Simultaneously London re-orientated its strategic concerns to playing a more significant role in European and NATO defence interests in that region. The British experience in Libya from 1964 to 1969 was not a "half-hearted" disengagement that Young maintains was evident in Britain's relations with other Arab

---

<sup>11</sup> O'Hara and Parr, 'The Rise and Fall of a Reputation', 478.

<sup>12</sup> Young, *The Labour Governments*, p.226.

states.<sup>13</sup> The relationship involved consideration of what British interests were in Libya and how best to secure them whilst reducing commitments to the bare minimum. Furthermore Hughes' accusation that defence policy was not governed by an "appraisal of where the UK's interests lay" but was formed through a process of "muddling through" and withdrawal from East of Suez "had all the characteristics of a scuttle" do not hold when we consider the Anglo-Libyan experience and the emphasis officials and ministers placed on securing British interests.<sup>14</sup> After the events of September 1969 policy was not a "muddle" or "scuttle" reaction as the Labour Government was resolutely committed to forging a new relationship with the nationalist regime in Tripoli. The government also had a strategy based upon wider policy issues and remained dedicated to maintaining peace in the Middle East whilst working through multinational organisations. The accusation by diplomats in Libya that there appeared to be no strategy did not take into account the Government's priorities of playing a role in calming the military environment in the region and protecting Britain's economic and political interests in the Arab world.

When the Labour Government unexpectedly lost the 1970 election the policy record on Anglo-Libyan relations and the facilities showed that both countries, until 1969, had a relationship built upon a "shared tradition" of strategic self interest, which became of increasing economic benefit to the British. It was very unlikely, given the complete failure of negotiations for a relationship from 1969 to 1970 and the increasing radicalisation of the RCC that London or Tripoli had any common ground upon which to replicate the arrangement that existed between 1964 and 1970. The relationship that existed for the next thirty years was marred by diplomatic and strategic antagonism between the two very different states that served little economic benefit for either party. Not until the turn of the century did the relationship regain any

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>14</sup> G. Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (Ipswich/New York, 2009), p.111.

of its former closeness as this strategic “shared tradition” brought the two nations together once more.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

### National Archives

BT Records of the Board of Trade.

CAB Records of the Cabinet Office.

DEFE Records of the Ministry of Defence.

FCO Records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

FO Records created and inherited by the Foreign Office.

PREM Records of the Prime Minister's Office.

T Records of the Treasury.

WO Records of the War Office.

BT 241 Board of Trade. Commercial Relations and Export Division.

CAB 21 Subject File.

CAB 129 Cabinet Office: Cabinet Minutes and Papers: Cabinet: Memoranda (CP and C Series).

CAB 148 Cabinet Office: Defence and Oversea Policy Committees and Sub-committees: Minutes and Papers (DO, DOP, OPD and OPDO Series).

CAB 159 Ministry of Defence and Cabinet Office: Central Intelligence Machinery: Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee later Committee: Minutes (JIC Series).

CAB 163 War Cabinet, Ministry of Defence, and Cabinet Office: Central Intelligence Machinery: Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee, later Committee: Secretariat: Files.

CAB 185 Cabinet Office: Central Office Machinery: Joint Intelligence Committee (A): Minutes (JIC (A), JIC).

CAB 186 Cabinet Office: Central Intelligence Machinery: Joint Intelligence Committee: Memoranda (JIC (A), JIC).

CAB 188 Cabinet Office: Central Intelligence Machinery: Joint Intelligence Committee (B) and Overseas Economic Intelligence Committee: Minutes, Memoranda and Other Documents.

DEFE 7 Ministry of Defence prior to 1964: Registered Files.

DEFE 11 Ministry of Defence: Chiefs of Staff Committee: Registered Files.

DEFE 24 Ministry of Defence: Defence Secretariat Branches and their Predecessors: Registered Files.

DEFE 68 Ministry of Defence: Central Staffs: Registered Files and Branch Folders.

FCO 7 Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: American and Latin American Departments: Registered Files (A and AL Series).

FCO 8 Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Arabian Department and Middle East Department: Registered Files (B and NB Series).

FCO 17 Foreign Office, Eastern Department and successors: Registered Files (E and NE Series).

FCO 26 Foreign and Commonwealth Office and predecessors: Information, News and Guidance Departments: Registered Files (I and P Series).

FCO 27 Commonwealth Office: Middle East, Western and United Nations Department and Mediterranean Department: Registered Files (M Series).

FCO 30 Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: European Economic Organisations Department and successors: Registered Files (ME and MW Series).

FCO 33 Foreign Office, Western Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western European Department: Registered Files (R and WR Series).

FCO 39 Foreign Office, North and East African Department and successors: Registered Files (V and NA Series).

FCO 41 Foreign Office, Western Organisations and Co-ordination Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western Organisations Department: Registered Files (W and WD Series).

FCO 46 Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Defence Department and successors: Registered Files (ZD, DP and DT Series).

FCO 49 Foreign and Commonwealth Office and predecessors: Planning Staff and Commonwealth Policy and Planning Department: Registered Files (PP, ZP and RS Series).

FCO 67 Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Commodities and Oil Department and successors: Registered Files (MC and ML Series).

FO 181 Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Embassy and Consulates, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (formerly Russian Empire): General Correspondence.

FO 371 Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966.

PREM 11 Prime Minister's Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1951-1964.

PREM 13 Prime Minister's Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1964-1970.

T 225 Treasury: Defence Policy and Materiel Division: Registered Files (DM and 2DM Series).

T 295 Treasury: Overseas Finance (Exchange Control) Division: Registered Files (2 FEC Series).

T317 Treasury: Finance - Overseas Development Divisions and successors: Registered Files (2FD Series).

WO 32 War Office and successors: Registered Files (General Series).

### **Official Publications**

Foreign Relations of the United States. Available from <http://history.state.gov/> and <http://www.state.gov/> [2 August 2010]

Anglo-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, Cmnd 8914 (London, 1953).

Statement on the Defence Estimates, Cmnd 2901 (London, 1966).

Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy, Cmnd 3357 (London, 1967).

Plowden Committee Report, Cmnd 2276 (London, 1964).

### **Memoirs and Dairies**

Benn, T., *Office Without Power, Diaries 1968-1972* (London, 1988).

Brown, G., *In My Way* (London, 1971).

Callaghan, J., *Time and Chance* (London, 1987).

Castle, B., *The Castle Diaries 1964-1976* (London, 1990)

Castle, B., *Cabinet Diaries (Unpublished), 1965-1976*, Bradford University Library.

Crossman, R., *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol. 2* (London, 1976).

Crossman, R., *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol. 3* (London, 1977).

Healey, D., *The Time of My Life* (London, 1991).

Stewart, M., *Life and Labour* (London, 1980).

Wilson, H., *The Labour Government 1964-1970, A Personal Record* (London, 1971).

## Secondary Sources

### Books

- Adonis, A. and Thomas, K. (ed.), *Roy Jenkins, A Retrospective* (Oxford, 2004).
- Ashton, SR. and Louis, W.R. (ed.), *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964-1971, Part One East of Suez* (London, 2004).
- Balfour Paul, G., *The End of Empire in the Middle East* (Cambridge, 1991).
- Bennoune, M., *The Making of Contemporary Algeria* (Cambridge, 1988).
- Bayliss, J. (ed), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London, 1977).
- Blundy, D. and Lycett, A., *Gaddafi and the Libyan Revolution* (London, 1987).
- Brenchley, F., *Britain, the Six Day War and its Aftermath* (London, 2005).
- Brenchley, F., *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-1987* (London, 1989).
- Campbell, J., *Roy Jenkins, A Biography* (London, 1983).
- Cordesman, A.H., *A Tragedy of Arms: Military and Security Developments in the Maghreb* (Westport, 2002).
- Corthorn, P. and Davis, J. (ed.), *The British Labour Party and the Wider World, Domestic Politics, Internationalism and Foreign Policy* (London, 2008).
- Croft, S., Dorman, A., Rees, W., Muttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000. A Policy Revaluation* (Harlow, 2001).
- Coleman, J., *A "Special Relationship"? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-Americans Relations "at the Summit", 1964-1968* (Manchester, 2004).
- Coopey, R., Fielding, S., Tiratsoo, N. (ed.), *The Wilson Governments 1964- 1970* (London, 1993).
- Curtis, M., *The Ambiguities of Power* (London, 1995).
- De Candole, E.V.A., *The Life and Times of King Idris of Libya* (Manchester, 1990).
- Dockrill, M., *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford, 1988).
- Dockrill, S., *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez, The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke/New York, 2002).
- Dorey, P., *The Labour Governments 1964-1970* (Oxford/New York, 2006).
- Faringdon, H., *Strategic Geography: NATO, The Warsaw Pact, and the SuperPowers* (London/New York, 1989).
- First, R., *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (London, 1974).

- Frankel, J., *British Foreign Policy, 1945-1973* (London, 1975).
- Fraser, T.G., *The USA and the Middle East Since World War 2* (London, 1989).
- Gilby, N., *The UK Government and Arms Trade Corruption: A Short History*, Goodwin Paper #4 (London, 2005).
- Hennessey, P., *The British Prime Minister, The Office and its Holders since 1945* (London, 2000).
- Hughes, G., *Harold Wilson's Cold War, The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (Ipswich/New York, 2009).
- Humbaraci, H., *Algeria: A Revolution that failed* (London, 1966).
- James, L., *Nasser at War, Arab Images of the Enemy* (Basingstoke/New York, 2006).
- Kaiser, W. and Staerck, W. (ed.), *British Foreign Policy 1955-1964, Contracting Options* (Basingstoke/New York, 2000).
- Kelly, S., *Cold War in the Desert* (London, 2000).
- Kerr, M., *The Arab Cold War, Gamal 'Abd Al-Nasir and his Rivals 1958-1970* (Oxford, 1971).
- Laqueur, W., *The Struggle for the Middle East, The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1958-1968* (London, 1972).
- Little, D., *American Orientalism, The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (London, 2008).
- Louis, W.R., *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Post War Imperialism* (Oxford, 1984).
- McNamara, R., *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East 1952-1967* (London, 2003).
- Mangold, P., *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke/New York, 2001).
- Mayall, J. and Payne, A. (ed.), *The Fallacies of Hope: The Post-Colonial Record of the Commonwealth Third World* (Manchester, 1991).
- Mayhew, C., *Britain's Role Tomorrow* (London, 1967).
- Monroe, E., *Britain's moment in the Middle East 1914-1956* (London, 1981).
- Morgan, A., *Harold Wilson, A Life* (London, 1992).
- Oren, M., *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford, 2002).
- Ovendale, R., *Britain and the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East* (London, 1996).
- Owen, R., *State, Power and Politics in the making of the modern Middle East* (London/New York, 2008).

- Pearce, E., *Denis Healey, A Life In Our Times* (London, 2002).
- Petersen, T., *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East 1961-1969, A Willing Retreat*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Eastbourne/2009).
- Pickering, J., *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (Basingstoke/ New York, 1998).
- Pimlott B., *Harold Wilson* (London, 1993).
- Reynolds, D., *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York, 1991).
- Ro' I, Y. And Morozov, B., *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Washington, 2008).
- Roth, A., *Sir Harold Wilson, Yorkshire Walter Mitty* (London, 1977).
- Sanders, C., *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* (Oxford, 2000).
- Sanders, D., *Losing an Empire Finding a Role, British Foreign Policy since 1945* (Basingstoke/New York, 1990).
- Sayigh, Y. and Shlaim, A., *The Cold war and the Middle East* (Oxford, 1997).
- Simons, G., *Libya and the West, From Independence to Lockerbie* (Oxford, 2003).
- Simons, G., *Libya, The Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke/New York, 1993).
- Simons, G., *Libya, The Struggle for Survival*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke/New York, 1996).
- Smith, S.C., *Britain's Revival and Fall in the Gulf, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950-1971* (London/2004).
- Smith, S.C., *Kuwait 1950-1965, Britain, the al-Sabah and Oil* (Oxford,1999).
- S<sup>t</sup> John, R.B., *Libya and the United States* (Philadelphia 2002).
- Stone, M., *The Agony of Algeria* (London, 1997).
- Van Dijk, R., *Encyclopaedia of the Cold War* (London, 2008).
- Wallace, W., *The Foreign Policy Process in Britain* (London, 1976).
- Vandewalle, D., *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge, 2006).
- Vandewalle, D., *Libya since Independence* (New York, 1998).
- Wilson, K., *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Middle East, the Anglo-Egyptian experience, 1882-1982* (London, 1983).
- Winrow, G., *Dialogue with the Mediterranean: The Role of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative* (London/New York, 2000).
- Wright, J., *Libya a Modern History* (London, 1981).

Yapp, M., *The Near East since The First World War* (London/New York, 1996).

Yaqub, S., *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine in the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA, 2004).

Young, J.W., *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2, International Policy* (Manchester, 2003).

Young, J.W., *Britain and European Unity, 1945-1992* (London, 1993).

Ziegler P., *Wilson the Authorised Life* (London, 1995).

Ziegler, P., *Mountbatten* (London, 1986).

## Articles

- Ashton, N.J., 'A microcosm of decline: British loss of nerve and military intervention in Jordan and Kuwait, 1958 and 1961', *The Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), 1069-1083.
- Blackwell, S., 'Saving the King: Anglo-American strategy and British counter-subversion operations in Libya, 1953-1959', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39 (2003), 1-18.
- Byrne, J.J., 'Our Own Special Brand of Socialism: Algeria and the Contest of Modernities in the 1960s', *Diplomatic History*, 33 (2009), 427-447.
- Darwin, J., 'British Decolonisation since 1945', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (1984).
- Evron, Y., 'French arms policy in the Middle East', *The World Today*, (1970), 82-90.
- Gat, M., 'Britain and Israel Before and After the Six Day War, June 1967: From Support to Hostility', *Contemporary British History*, 18 (2004), 54-77.
- Hanning, H., 'Britain East of Suez Facts and Figures', *International Affairs*, 42 (1966), 253-260.
- Howard, M., 'Britain's strategic problem East of Suez', *International Affairs*, 42 (1966), 179-183.
- Louis, W.R., 'American Anti-colonialism and the Dissolution of the British Empire', *International Affairs*, 61 (1985), 395-420.
- Monroe, E., 'British facilities in the Middle East; Assets or Liabilities?', *International Affairs*, 42 (1966), 24-34.
- O'Hara, G. and Parr, H., 'Introduction: the Fall and Rise of a Reputation', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 295-302.
- O'Hara, G. and Parr, H., 'Conclusions: Harold Wilson's 1964-70 Governments and the Heritage of 'New' Labour', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 477-489.
- Pargeter, A., 'Anglo-Libyan Relations and the Suez Crisis', *Journal of North African Studies*, 5 (2000), 41-58.
- Parr, H., 'Britain America East of Suez and the EEC: Finding a Role in British Foreign Policy 1964-1967', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 403-421.
- Petersen, T., 'Crossing the Rubicon? Britain's withdrawal from the Middle East, 1964-1968: A Bibliographical Review', *The International History Review*, 22 (2000), 318-240.
- Podeh, E., 'The Lie That Won't Die: Collusion 1967', *The Middle East Quarterly*, 11 (2004), 51-62.
- Slonim, S., 'Egypt, Algeria, and the Libyan Revolution', *The World Today*, (1970), 125-130.

Smith, S.C., 'Revolution and reaction: South Arabia in the aftermath of the Yemeni revolution', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28 (2000), 198-208.

Smith, S.C., 'Power Transferred? , Britain, the United States and the Gulf, 1956-1971', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 1-23.

Thorpe, K., 'The Forgotten Shortage: Britain's handling of the 1967 Oil embargo', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2009), 201-222.

Young, J.W., 'International Factors and the 1964 election', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), 351-371.

Worrall, R., 'The strategic limitations of a Middle East client state by the mid-1950s: Britain, Libya and the Suez Crisis', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30 (2007), 309-347.

## Electronic Sources

BBC News, 2007. "BP Returns to Libya in \$900 Million deal". Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6700255.stm> [2 March 2010].

BBC News, 2008. Gaddafi: Africa's "King of Kings". Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7588033.stm> [29 August 2008].

British Diplomatic Oral History Project: Available from <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/> [22 January 2010].

Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2010. Our Shared Tradition: Available from <http://ukinlibya.fco.gov.uk/en/working-with-libya/shared-tradition> [22 January 2010].

N Gilby, *The UK Government and Arms Trade Corruption: A Short History*, Goodwin Paper #4 (London, 2005). Available from <http://www.caat.org.uk/resources/publications/corruption/corruption-report-0605.pdf> [7 February 2010]

ICBH, "The decision to withdraw from East of Suez", Seminar held 16 November 1990. Available from <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/witness/esuez/> [3 April 2004].

E Podesh, Winter 2004, 'The Lie That Won't Die: Collusion 1967', *The Middle East Quarterly*, (11,1). Available from <http://www.meforum.org/587/the-lie-that-wont-die-collusion-1967> [2 May 2010].

S Shalom, The United States and Libya Part 1: Before Gaddafi . Available from <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb1.html> [3 April 2004].