

Costs of UK's colonial war in Libya spiral

By Joe Mount
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A leading defense expert has tallied the real costs of the UK's seven-month-old military intervention in Libya. The sum spent so far vastly outstrips previous claims of UK ministers, confirming that the expenses of the imperialist intervention have been deliberately concealed.

According to the figures compiled by *Defense Analysis* editor Francis Tusa, the war has cost around £1.75 billion so far. This cautious estimate for extra military expenditures in Libya up to the end of August is seven times greater than the figure stated by Defence Secretary Liam Fox this summer.

The claim that this vast sum is being expended out of humanitarian concern for the Libyan masses is aimed at concealing the deployment of the military firepower of Britain and other western powers against the Libyan people. The coastal city of Sirte is under massive rocket and missile bombardment by NATO. Its residents—subject to a prolonged blockade of food, water and medicine—have been told to leave the city, creating a refugee crisis. Through such terror, the western powers aim to seize control of Libya's oil reserves and establish a strategic base in North Africa.

Tusa is a military journalist, with ties to the Ministry of Defence. Speaking to the *Guardian* newspaper, he said that “where there has been any doubt, I have underestimated rather than overestimated in my calculations.”

Based on publicly-released figures from the Royal Air Force (RAF) and numbers quoted during parliamentary questions, Tusa used two different methods to estimate the total costs of the war. His first calculation gave a total between £1.38 billion and £1.58 billion, and his second between £850 million and £1.75 billion.

The figures give the costs incurred due to military operations in Libya alone, ignoring routine training and maintenance costs. They do not include the cost of

recent RAF sorties, involving flights from mainland Britain to the North African coast for bombing and reconnaissance missions. Some preparatory logistic operations, such as the transport of tonnes of military hardware to bases in Italy by a fleet of Eddie Stobart trucks, were also left out.

Writing separately in the *Guardian*, he complained of the “tangled, murky” flows of cash as he descended to the “deepest, darkest basements of the MoD, to where the accounts get drawn up.”

The civil service is deliberately obscuring outlays on the NATO-led campaign. The intervention was launched in the wake of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, calling for a no-fly zone over Libya, supposedly in the interests of preventing massacres of civilians by the Libyan army. At the time, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne declared he would spend “tens of millions” on the war.

However, it became clear that the defeat of forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime would not be so straight-forward. The so-called “rebel” forces—led by former members of the regime and CIA-assets—had little support across the country, especially in the capital Tripoli and the city of Sirte. The conquest of Tripoli in August required a major increase in NATO operations, especially in lethal bombing raids.

In June, Fox claimed that operational costs in Libya had reached £120 million, and that £140 million worth of bombs and missiles had been used.

Tusa's figures make clear that this is a significant underestimate. According to his figures it costs £2.5 million per day to run a single Eurofighter Typhoon fighter-bomber. The UK is operating ten Typhoons from a base in southern Italy. Paveway IV bombs cost £50,000 per mission. These form part of the average £65 million weekly cost of British air operations in Libya.

The UK has deployed 32 reconnaissance and combat

aircraft. Also present are Apache helicopters and a flotilla of ships including warships, a submarine, anti-mine vessels and a helicopter carrier.

So far, the UK military has carried out over 1,600 missions in Libya, during which 900 “targets” were either damaged or destroyed.

The MoD budget covers routine training and maintenance costs, whereas the Treasury bankrolls large-scale foreign offensives. The war in Libya is currently paid by the Treasury’s special reserve fund.

The government responded to the figures by insisting that costs are under control. Speaking to *Sky News*, a MoD spokesman declared: “the net additional cost of Operation Ellamy [the UK’s attack on Libya] is in the region of £110 million... the cost of replenishing munitions expended over this period may be up to £130 million.”

Others have warned, however, that the costs could mean the MoD having to make steep cuts. Such criticisms, like the calls for greater “transparency” on the part of the MoD, are being used by the ruling class to demand the government back down from spending cuts in Britain’s military forces.

There has been no opposition to the devastating loss of life in Libya during a half-year of bombardment. The Labour Party enthusiastically supported the war from the beginning. The architect of the bloody and illegal invasion of Iraq, Labour has criticized the financial costs of the Libyan war solely on the basis that they undermine Britain’s ability to fight on several fronts.

Labour maintains that the war is based on humanitarian principles, despite the huge loss of life, wholesale destruction of infrastructure and atrocities against African itinerant workers. Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander told *Sky News*, “I recognise that there's been a cost that's been borne by Britain. But I think that we should be proud that we managed to avoid a situation like Rwanda in previous years, where we saw mass slaughter because the international community decided simply to turn away.”

The costs of the war in Libya must be seen in the context of the squandering of vast amounts of public wealth by successive British governments in the imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last decade. According to official figures reported last year, these wars had cost more than £20 billion. Between

April 2001 and March 2010, at least £9.24 billion was spent on the imperialist war in Iraq and £11.1 billion in Afghanistan. These figures are costs in addition to the £35 billion annual defence budget.

The final costs for these wars are expected to be far higher, as the figures do not include troops' salaries, care for the wounded, and future mental health care.

It is estimated that close to £5 billion a year will be spent by the coalition government to fund its continuing military operations in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, workers in Britain and across Europe are being ordered to submit to the greatest campaign of austerity measures in recent history. The ruling class has written itself a blank cheque to fund neo-colonial conquests around the world, but insists that essential social services be cut in the name of “deficit reduction.”

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