Dear Tim,

The European Union military operation in the Southern Central Mediterranean

I am writing to respond to the Committee’s report of 13 May 2016 titled “Operation Sophia, the EU’s naval mission in the Mediterranean: an impossible challenge”.

The Committee’s report is a detailed and welcome contribution to this debate. We have studied its conclusions carefully and share many of your assessments. Op Sophia faces a challenging context and delivering its core mandate is not a straightforward task. We recognise the hurdles that the Committee identifies. Consequently, we have taken account of your recommendations as we negotiated Op Sophia’s refreshed mandate – which includes training of the Libyan Coastguard and interdiction of illicit arms shipments to Libya. To support the latter task, the Prime Minister announced on 29 June the deployment of RFA Mounts Bay. This is in addition to HMS Enterprise’s existing deployment which will continue.

For ease, I have structured my response along the lines of the Committee’s summary of conclusions and recommendations.

Assessment of Op Sophia

The Committee is right to highlight the need for a comprehensive intelligence picture. Indeed, between July and October 2015 Op Sophia focused on building an understanding of migrant smuggling networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean. This work has continued since the operation’s transition to Phase 2a and will remain an ongoing task. We are seeking a NATO role in support of Op Sophia in order to allow the Alliance to bring to bear its considerable Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance and other capabilities. Secretary-General Stoltenberg has asked NATO to draw up options for this support.

The Committee highlights the constraints that Op Sophia has faced because of the political situation in Libya. For much of the operation’s mandate, the Libyan parties were negotiating
a Government of National Accord (GNA) which limited their ability to work with the EU to tackle migration. The Government of National Accord GNA is making some progress in taking control of the machinery of Government in Tripoli and beginning to assert its authority. The international community remains united in support of the GNA. We are working closely with international partners to support the GNA to unite the country to improve delivery of basic services, and to develop a comprehensive approach to defeating Daesh and tackling illegal migration. We have allocated £10 million in this financial year to help restore stability in Libya; rebuild the economy; fight Daesh; and tackle the criminal gangs that fuel illegal migration. I welcome the recent announcement by the Libyan Government authorising implementation of the coastguard training programme and appointing a committee to work with Op SOPHIA's Operational Commander.

Considerations for the next phases

We agree with the Committee that the greatest effect is likely to be achieved in the operation’s later phases, but that these are dependent upon political conditions in Libya. In the meantime, Op Sophia will begin a package of training for the Libyan Coastguard. This has several benefits. It will boost the capacity of the Libyan Coastguard to tackle migration themselves. It will build trust with our Libyan partners which may help facilitate a move to the operation’s later phases. And building a capable Libyan Coastguard puts counter-migration efforts onto a more sustainable footing. We will keep the Committee updated as this work progresses.

In terms of the justification for a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation, the purpose of Operation Sophia is to break the business model of the smugglers who are profiting from the Central Mediterranean route. We believe that this requires military assets to enable Op Sophia to gather intelligence and interdict migrant smugglers and arms traffickers. For the EU, this means CSDP. Frontex can of course play a role but it does not have the right tools or mandate to achieve the task. Op Sophia’s sophisticated assets are fundamental to the EU’s ability to understand and counter the smuggling networks. A commercial, or non-military, alternative would not bring the same capabilities.

The Committee identifies the need to keep Op Sophia’s mandate under review. We agree. Mandates are strictly time-bound and kept under review. We have insisted on a formal evaluation every six months so that unsuccessful or poorly performing operations are not automatically rolled over.

The operation’s legal framework is essential. As my letter of 15 June set out, the UK played the lead role in negotiating UNSCRs 2240 and 2292 which underpin what the operation is able to carry out on the High Seas. We concur with the Committee that a move into Libyan territorial waters would require a further legal base to handle any migrants rescued or smugglers interdicted/collection in territorial waters.

The bigger picture

We share the Committee’s view that the migration crisis requires an international response. Two major conferences in September – a UN High Level Event to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, and a Refugee Summit hosted by President Obama
– provide a further opportunity to help build a sustainable global response to large population movements and irregular migration.

We have long argued for a broader approach to migration by the EU. Operation Sophia is only one part of both the UK’s and the EU’s approach to the migrant crisis.

The UK is helping source and transit countries to reduce the push factors; build stability and create livelihoods; and to go after the criminal gangs and smuggling networks that profit from this human misery. A large multi agency Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) Taskforce, led by the National Crime Agency, is working with a number of international partners – driving the sharing of intelligence and progressing criminal investigations and disruptions. It focuses on the crime networks in source and transit countries, including the Mediterranean, as well as at the UK cross Channel Border.

The UK will be leaving the EU, but we will not be turning our back on Europe. As the country with the largest European defence budget, our commitment to European security remains unchanged. For now we will maintain our current commitments to CSDP operations, including Op Sophia. We share many security interests with our European partners and continued engagement will remain important in meeting these shared challenges.

I am copying this letter to the Clerks of both Committees, Les Saunders at the Cabinet Office, Laura Young and Faisal Moosa, FCO Departmental Scrutiny Co-ordinators, and Sheila Underwood, FCO Select Committee Liaison Officer.

RT HON DAVID LIDINGTON MP