

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, HC 300

Tuesday 5 December 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Neil Coyle; Fabian Hamilton; Brendan O'Hara; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 79-118

Witnesses

I: John Casson, Former Foreign Affairs Private Secretary to the Prime Minister and ambassador to Egypt at Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, and Jay Mens, Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange.

II: Professor Anoush Ehteshami, Professor of International Relations at School of Government and International Affairs, University of Durham, Professor Simon Mabon, Professor of International Politics at Politics, Philosophy and Religion Department, University of Lancaster, and Professor Christopher Phillips, Professor in International Relations at School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Jay Mens

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125319/html/>

- Professor Anoush Ehteshami

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125221/html/>

- Professor Simon Mabon

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125302/html/>

- Professor Christopher Phillips

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125267/html/>

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Casson and Jay Mens.

Chair: Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we will be looking at our inquiry into the Middle East and North Africa. This session is to set the scene for the inquiry and look at a general overview of the MENA region and its sub-regions, and at the priorities that we should be focusing on within this inquiry. We have two fabulous guests appearing before us today. John, can I ask you to kindly introduce yourself?

John Casson: I am John Casson, and I'm a recovering diplomat and Arabist. I was deputy ambassador in Jordan from 2007 to 2009. I headed the Foreign Office's Near East and North Africa department in 2009 and 2010. I was private secretary to the Prime Minister for foreign and defence policy from 2010 to 2014, and I was British ambassador in Cairo from 2014 to 2018.

Chair: Thank you. Jay?

Jay Mens: My name is Jay Mens. I am Ernest May fellow of history and policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. I am also a senior fellow at Policy Exchange. From 2016 to 2023—to just a few weeks ago—I ran the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum at the University of Cambridge, which is a think-tank focused on the UK in the Middle East. I am currently in the process of finishing two books, one on the shadow war between Israel and Iran and another on the long history of the eastern question from 1800 to the present.

Q79 **Chair:** Brilliant. Thank you ever so much. John, if you could kick us off, this Committee has been quite critical that the tilt to the Indo-Pacific was a tilt away from the Middle East. Do you think that that is fair? Do you also think that it is inherent within our system that we essentially lurch from geographical focus to geographical focus because we allow ourselves to be led too reactively, rather than setting the agenda for what would be best in the UK's national interests?

John Casson: I think it is true. If you look at recent Government pronouncements about foreign policy strategy, and if you look at the Integrated Review and the refresh, it is startling how little there is of any kind of textual analysis of context about this region in which we have invested so much of our reputation and responsibility in the last two decades. I think that we lack a generational and societal approach that can be sustained and consistent. As a result, we have a default approach, which tends to be very focused on managing the status quo; it is very focused on state-to-state relationships and it does not identify what is toxic about that status quo that is generating the challenges to our interests, in terms of conflict, migration or the export of extremism.

Q80 **Chair:** In terms of that toxicity, where does that come from?



John Casson: I think that we need to look more deeply, in a sort of less superficial analysis, at the nature of the states and societies in the region. If you look at them internally, the states of the region tend to be authoritarian, and they tend to have an approach that is about managing their population and a securitised social contract. They are spending revenues that are generated by rents, not by productive economic activity, and they are using those to buy off and control the population, so they are not capable of generating societal consensus to solve complex problems of the nature that we want to partner with them on. It makes them brittle; they can be harsh and effective at security—at clamping down—but not very effective at solving long-term societal problems.

Looking externally, as actors in the region—as partners in the region—they tend to be competitive, nationalistic and erratic. By analysing our approach to the region purely through the lens of “Which states do we want to have a close partnership with?”, we tend to get leverage by those states, and we over-index towards the status quo that they are trying to protect. We buy into the stability myth that authoritarian regimes export and we fail to notice that, actually, that is in itself often a source of instability in the long term.

The irony is that a lot of this comes clothed in the aura and language in Whitehall of a kind of hard-headed, realist approach—a realpolitik approach—but, actually, it seems to me that it is not very realistic, in continuing to repeat the things that have failed in the past. I think that we need to get away from this sense that there is a tension between interests and values and say, “Actually, we have interests and values in short-term stability, but we have interests and values at stake, also, in a longer-term evolution of the region towards something that is more resilient, more stable, and more capable of solving the problems that we face together.”

Q81 **Chair:** Before I move to Jay, how do we move to becoming more strategic? Is it within the system? Is it within political leadership? Is it about a different lens through which we see foreign policy in the Middle East?

John Casson: We need, in a sense, to build a more systemic and national consensus when analysing what is going on. I would identify the sort of generational goals and measures of who we want to partner with and what we will talk to them about—we should not tack hither and thither in response to whatever the latest issue is or whatever pressure is being put on us. We should consistently explain a vision for the region: what do we think will make the region healthy for the people who live there and healthy for us?

We should be articulating that, particularly in terms of a collaborative approach internationally, rather than a competitive approach, and domestically without using values-laden problematic language like democracy or even the rule of law. We need to be looking for a social contract and encouraging our partners in the region to move towards a social contract, where the behaviour of states treats their populations as citizens with rights and responsibilities, where the action of the state is

constrained, where political and economic institutions are inclusive, and where the state is predictable and even-handed in its behaviour towards its population.

Chair: Before I come to Jay, Graham wanted to follow up.

- Q82 **Graham Stringer:** That was a really interesting answer. Wasn't it the opposite mistake we made 13 years ago during the Arab Spring, not to support the status quo, which is your thesis really, but to support what could have been quite radical change? Certainly the people pursuing the Arab Spring wanted radical change, so didn't we make the opposite mistake then?

John Casson: I don't think we made that mistake, no. There was a moment there which demonstrated this cycle of instability that we produced simply by backing incumbents who were interested in preserving their own interests and did not have an articulated vision of long-term reform.

When events started to break in the Arab Spring and a population started to ask for rights and responsibilities, we were we were caught out, really. We had had a long period since the since the Iraq war where we had failed to articulate any understanding of what kind of region would be good for Britain and for the world. But we followed events, and we tried to support them in a positive direction, and I do not really see what else one could do. We could not deny the people of the region what they were articulating in terms of a desire for a stake in their own society and their own future. I think Britain and the West tried to plot a middle path to help to manage change.

I think the policy dilemma and the thing that requires statecraft is, "How do you balance the short term and the long term?"—not, "Should we be on the side of the reformers or the side of the reactionaries?" There is a need for immediate stability, and there is a need for change. At the moment, we tend to entirely ignore the whole question of political economy and the instability that is being stored up for the next round of something like the Arab Spring in favour of simply looking at short-term stability, because that is the métier of our diplomats and our securocrats. They know how to talk to other incumbent diplomats and securocrats, and so inevitably they are over-indexed towards their interests.

Graham Stringer: Thank you.

- Q83 **Chair:** Jay, how do we become more effective at securing UK interests in the Middle East and avoiding this lurching and this difficulty in creating this generational plan, as John sets out?

Jay Mens: The question of framing is incredibly important. To John's point, there is one way of doing things, which is trying to take things case by case or going country by country, but I would offer a different argument. The thing that we as the West have failed to do on a consistent basis, really for the last 20 years, is to put the Middle East in a global



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context and to try and consider it in creating a strategy to think about what role the Middle East plays in the context of our global strategy.

Today, you have three important systemic threats. Not to kind of divert into the language of political science, but you have three main systemic threats. There are three concerted attempts essentially to destroy the US-led international order and everything that that entails—anti-liberal regimes, autocratic regimes, and those are, I think, incontrovertibly, Russia, China and Iran. There is a certain tendency to try to put Iran out of that camp of Russia and China, but over the last year, with the invasion of Ukraine, that has become significantly harder to do. I also think that it is an oversight, because if you think about everything that has happened in the region, certainly since the Arab Spring, it has all come from Tehran.

One of our main problems is a lack of focus. There is a constant desire to compartmentalise, rather than to be focused and targeted and realise that, in effect, for the last 10 years Iran has been doing what it set out to do since the start of the Islamic revolution in 1979, which is to kick the West out of the Middle East culturally, economically and politically, such that the ultimate goals of the Islamic revolution can be pursued. If you actually put that as your central regional focus and then think globally about a series of different attempts across the Eurasian world island essentially to change the world order as it is, everything suddenly makes sense. The Arab Spring, in not siding with the status quo, created an opportunity for Iran and its proxies, not to mention the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a separate question. Even now, our attempts to compartmentalise—we talked about Iranian proxies in Iran—create opportunities and leverage. Ultimately, it makes our partners in the region think very little of us—of course, that is something we can get into.

I will make the second point that there is actually a very long historical continuity with the idea of preserving the status quo, really since around 1800, which is the subject of my book project. There are three central uniting elements across British Middle East policy—three central interests, as it were, that have that have held true since the end of the Napoleonic wars. The first is to keep the Russians out, which has a clear geopolitical logic. You have access to the sea littorals of the Middle East, access to the eastern Mediterranean and the prospect of area access denial, which links in with Russian policy in Libya, Syria and ultimately Crimea and Ukraine. You also have additional leverage in the form of controlling refugee flows and weapons flows.

The second goal, of course, is to prevent the spread of ideologies that are inimical to our interest. Again, throughout the 1800s that was nationalism. However, that is not what we are dealing with today: we are dealing with various forms of Islamist extremism, Shi'a millenarianism and things that have a propensity to spread into the streets in the UK but also entail transnational networks, which receive a great deal of state funding and state support. The last pillar is to support our friends. Of course, we had the Ottoman empire, which made it much easier than dealing with all these different actors, but ultimately, over the course of the Bulgarian



uprisings, we decided that we would support the peoples of the empire, to use a well-worn euphemism. Ultimately, we threw them under the bus, for want of a better term, leading the Ottomans to side with the German empire in the first world war. These things have a tendency to repeat themselves. I am not saying that Saudi Arabia, for instance, is the new Ottoman empire, but in a certain sense it is trying to preserve a status quo and create some semblance of security and stability in the region at the geopolitical level. That is an interest that we very much share.

Saudi Arabia also has an interest—as do the other Gulf states, Israel and, to a large extent, Turkey—in preserving the world order that we helped to create and have a great deal in preserving. They benefit from it economically, politically and in security terms, provided that we are actually active. That is the framing that I would use.

- Q84 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Before I bring in Brendan, I will go back to the conversation about demonstrating commitment. John, you mentioned the Integrated Review; neither the Integrated Review nor the Integrated Review Refresh had a Gaza or Palestine reference. There was one reference to Israel in terms of security partnership. That is despite the fact that this Committee has been warning since January this year that we would see a Gaza crisis in 2023 and the historic commitments that we have to that. Is Gaza essentially a fundamental demonstration of where we have failed to be consistent?

John Casson: It is a very specific example, but I think it illustrates what I was talking about. I was interested that Jay put this in the framing of the 19th century, because the orientalist perspective still pertains, in that we tend to imagine the Middle East and North Africa as a region of either grotesque threats or fabulous riches. We do not think about Arab populations as citizens—people with their own rights, responsibilities and political complexity. To simply see it in terms of a great power game—I am sure we could follow the trail all the way through the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries—does not engender stability and security.

Looking at Gaza, I think it is a very good example of how we were over-indexed towards what the incumbents in certain states were telling us. We swallowed the line that Palestine was no longer an issue of generational salience in the region, and that it was all about Iran now. There wasn't a Palestinian incumbent to really talk to, so we did not pay any attention to the needs of Palestinian society or politics. As a result, we have been leveraged—and we are still being leveraged—by Israel; and we are managing a toxic status quo, instead of offering any way out of the cycle of violence.

Chair: That is very helpful. Brendan, I know you want to come in on that.

- Q85 **Brendan O'Hara:** Thank you, Chair. Over the past few weeks, the Committee will have taken a lot of evidence from people across the region in relation to Israel and Gaza. It has been said to us that the UK's reputation—which was already low—is now at what they described as an all-time low since 7 October. Is that a fair assessment we have been



given?

John Casson: I don't know. I don't have any measures of that. But I think it is one of the challenges of the positioning we have taken, which to me seems fundamentally driven by what is comfortable, either in domestic politics, or in terms of positioning. It does raise questions about our credibility internationally.

We talk in the Integrated Review Refresh and in other places about the need to build consensus and alliances with the global middle ground. But our orientation towards certain incumbent states in the Middle East and North Africa undermines that credibility of building a wider consensus, because of the obvious appearance of double standards. That is a secondary problem with the position we have taken in Gaza.

I think there is a more urgent matter of national interest in repositioning the position we have taken on Gaza, which is to do with the interests of Israelis and Palestinians themselves, as well as our secondary influence. We need to get away from some of the comfortable illusions we are hiding behind. One of them is that supporting whatever the Netanyahu coalition chooses to do is the same as supporting the future security and safety of the Israeli people. I think that until we are prepared to say those two things are incompatible, we will be following events, and will not have any meaningful impact on them.

Q86 **Chair:** Jay, do you want to come in on that, before I go to Henry?

Jay Mens: Yes, definitely. I have three points. First, I don't think 7 October at all challenged the premise that it is all about Iran; I think 7 October would have been impossible without Iran. Again, we can go into as granular detail as is possible—from equipment, to planning, to the dozen meetings that took place in Beirut, Damascus and Tehran prior to the event. We can go into the sudden influx of Iraqi militias into the Golan, we can go into Hezbollah moving its troops from north-east Syria to southern Lebanon, we can go into Iran running weapons into the west bank for the last two years, in order to try and divert troops from Israeli Southern Command to Central Command, and so on.

We are dealing with a situation in which Iran is a malign actor trying to change the status quo. It lends state support to every possible effort in the region to do so which is inimical to Western interests. I don't think the UK can be blamed for 7 October, but that should be a definitive wake-up call about the role of Iran. It should demonstrate that this is ultimately what we are dealing with, and that this should effectively be the cornerstone of how we think about the region in security terms.

That is something we went into a tremendous amount of detail on in our Policy Exchange paper, "The Iran Question and British Strategy". If you want a Eurasian strategy in global context, and you actually want to address the security realities in the region—that all the partners in the region are discussing—that is where we need to think.



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Secondly—particularly regarding the conflict, which I am sure is a topic of much interest—the Israeli Government is no longer just a Netanyahu-led coalition. All security decisions are taken by a consensus-based Security Cabinet that includes Benny Gantz, Gadi Eizenkot and others. The Israeli Government now are in an extremely difficult position in terms of how to get out of what started on 7 October. It is—

- Q87 **Chair:** Forgive me: the coalition are not in the war Cabinet; it is only in the wider political Cabinet. It is not part of the decisions that are being made on military engagement.

Jay Mens: Yes. You have the wider instances—with the hostage release, for example, there was a full Cabinet vote—but the Security Cabinet ultimately takes all decisions pertaining to the war, and it has five or six members from across the Israeli political spectrum.

- Q88 **Henry Smith:** Jay, can I turn to you first? Fascinatingly, you mentioned the historical context from the Napoleonic wars, and, incidentally, I look forward to reading your book when it is published.

Britain had a huge influence over the Middle East region. It was in the British Foreign Office and the French foreign ministry that many of the international boundaries—Sykes-Picot and so forth—were drawn up, just over a century ago. In reality, what is Britain's influence in the region today? Are we confined to working with partners such as the US, some partners in the region and European nations?

Jay Mens: That is a fantastic question. Certainly, over the course of helping to write our paper for Policy Exchange, we asked ourselves that question over and over again: namely, what can the UK actually do and how much do we actually matter? When you think about the Indo-Pacific tilt and the nature of engagement between the UK and the Pacific that it lays out—what that means for the military in an intelligence capacity, our diplomatic efforts and so on—the Middle East is, in reality, much closer to home. In a sense, we have much deeper relations across the region in terms of elites and economic relationships. The UK can do quite a lot in terms of capacity, diplomatically, economically and in other areas. All of these recommendations are laid out in the Policy Exchange paper, which is titled "The Iran Question and British Strategy".

There are lots of things that we can do, even with soft power. BBC Persian is one of the most watched channels in the Middle East—at least, it was, until recent cuts. BBC Persian's radio service is one of the greatest in the world, in addition to Radio Farda, which is run by the US. Those are things that we are capable of doing. It is the same with our world-class language abilities that we should invest in.

Intelligence assets is a completely different question, economically, in terms of standing up sanctions enforcement capacity and taking it seriously.

Then, of course, there is the question of working with the US. I think that there are two different approaches to that. The first, which you would call



the French approach, is where Emmanuel Macron goes around the region trying to assert a French role. Then there is the other role, which I think the UK is better suited to, which is working closely with the US and, on occasion, doing things that the US is not able to do, either because of political restraints on account of the nature of the American political system or because of political will. Of course we have to co-ordinate with the US; I think a lot of our partners in the region speak to us and deal with us because they see the UK as an “America whisperer” of sorts. That is not to say that the UK does not have capacity of its own; it is just a question of how and where we deploy that capacity, and that is a decision we have to make in the context of the bigger global picture.

- Q89 **Henry Smith:** Before I put that question to John, I want to pick up on one thing from your remarks. You mentioned identifying Iran as being behind a lot of the malign activity—certainly that which we have seen in the last couple of months. Why do you think there is such a reticence in Washington, Riyadh and other places to name the country or regime that is behind so many of the attempts—successful, I would argue—to destabilise the region?

Jay Mens: I think the single word is “de-escalation”, or at least the mantra of de-escalation. There is the idea of compartmentalising the full spectrum of Iranian activity, from the nuclear programme to proxies and the very large amount of Iranian intelligence activity that goes on in the UK, across Europe and even in the United States. By putting all these things into different pockets, you can reduce the risk of us actually having to threaten Iran and, in theory, reduce the risk of war, although I think we have already seen that that is not necessarily the case.

The fact that you can have nearly 100 attacks on American facilities and Iran can essentially proceed within plausible deniability is quite remarkable. The only way you can do that is by trying to downplay or deny the extent of Iran’s role. Certainly from the Saudi point of view, from the resumption of relations—the truce, we will call it, rather than normalisation—in March, there is a strong incentive to say, “As long as you leave me out of this, I have nothing to do with it.”

Again, that comes back to our own reticence to engage substantively with the Iran question. The Houthis are now attacking international shipping, and Saudi Arabia is effectively giving us a taste of our own medicine by saying, “That’s not my problem. You fix it.” I would say that “Compartmentalisation for de-escalation” is the mantra in operation now.

- Q90 **Henry Smith:** John, what is your perspective on British influence in the region? Is it still vital, or are we having to be part of a bigger picture with other partners, both in the region and internationally, such as the US, European nations and so forth?

John Casson: It is clearly a bit of both. We do not have the luxury of ignoring the region or exiting from it, as events keep teaching us, but we do not get to dictate what happens there either. It is not for us to dictate events in the region, but we have responsibilities. Take Gaza, for example.



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We help to arm the IDF, and we help to rebuild Gaza every time it is flattened. We have a national interest in the export of extremism, migration and conflict from the region. So we have to do what we can, but we do it by far the most effectively in coalition with others, by being consistent and sustained, and by finding ways to pay sustained attention. Part of the problem is that we erratically move from issue to issue, depending on the events of the day or the agenda of the incumbent powers.

I want to go back to this point about it all being about Iran. It is very convenient to be able to echo back to the Gulf states and the Israelis what they want to hear us say, but that is actually part of the construction of the problem in the first place. Iran's influence and ability to cause problems, which are obviously incredibly threatening and concerning, stem from our failure to look beyond the narrow state-state securocratic lens. The ungoverned spaces and the failed states in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Libya all create opportunities for Iran to make mischief, and they all exist because of the problem I was talking about at the beginning: we do not look at the states in the region as a whole—through the whole lens of the social contract and political economy. We are forced to pretend that we do not notice that the states that we call our partners are actually making things worse in Libya and Yemen. We export the solution to these countries, whose interests are not directly aligned with ours.

- Q91 **Henry Smith:** To quickly follow up, yesterday we heard from former US National Security Adviser John Bolton, who believes a two-state solution is effectively dead. He talks about a multi-state solution: transferring Gaza back to Egyptian sovereignty and the West Bank back to Jordanian sovereignty, however implausible that may be given current events. What is your perspective on the two-state solution in reality?

John Casson: I am very reluctant to use that phrase, because it has been an excuse that we have all hidden behind for too long, and it has become an empty phrase. One of the illusions that I feel we need to get beyond is this idea that we say that we support what the Netanyahu Government are doing and we support a two-state solution. Those two things are incompatible. The evidence is incontrovertible that Netanyahu and the people around him would like to dismantle, and are successfully dismantling, the prospect of a two-state solution. Until we are prepared to name a reality, we are not going to be having any impact.

Similarly, there is an illusion about whether there is a primarily military solution to the Hamas problem. If you have voted against a ceasefire, you have implicitly said, "There is a military thing that can be achieved to defeat Hamas that makes this cost acceptable." If you have said that, you have a responsibility to name what it is. What is that military outcome, which will effectively defeat Hamas at a level that justifies the cost that we are seeing? Nobody, whether in Israel, the United States or here, is identifying and articulating that clearly. Winning the peace is even harder than winning the war. Getting influence and leverage in this situation is incredibly difficult, but it starts with being prepared to name the



complexity and the uncomfortable truths rather than simply positioning ourselves in the least uncomfortable way for us.

- Q92 **Royston Smith:** John, I think you said that the West views the Middle East in terms of either grotesque violence or great riches. In the light of that, do you believe that the Middle East is an overall security threat or an economic opportunity?

John Casson: I don't feel able to accept that dichotomy. Let me take Egypt, which I know best. When I was the ambassador, we tended to get the most interest from Whitehall when we could talk about threats. People who tried to help me often said, "Egypt's like Pakistan on the Med. You've got to help John and help the Egyptians because if it blows up it will be very damaging for us in terms of instability, migration and all sorts of things." If I am honest, I would not have identified our interests as being so closely implicated in that way. The Israelis, the Gulf, the Germans and the Americans all had an interest in Egypt being in a kind of crisis of stability—in keeping Egypt stable—before we did.

Similarly, Egypt, which has the biggest Arab population, was not offering us fabulous riches. Although we were the largest foreign direct investor, it was not an economic power that would drive British prosperity. What I thought our interest was really engaged in was an opportunity cost. Here was a country with 110 million people that could demonstrate what an Arab country could look like if it was run in a way that was not a rentier economy, where the vested interest of the security state takes money from oil and gas and tourist beaches and uses it to control the population and squash any potential for private-sector growth. If you could treat the Egyptian population as the main asset of the country and create inclusive economic institutions that allow people to have a job, and generate wealth and private-sector growth, you could show that there was an alternative future for the region.

- Q93 **Royston Smith:** Jay, did you want to add anything about security threat or economic opportunity?

Jay Mens: Yes. Obviously, there are two different packages. When we speak about the region as a whole, on the one hand, you have Saudi Arabia and the public investment fund of the UAE, Mubadala, ADIC and all those big sovereign wealth funds, and on the other hand, you have, for instance, Lebanon or Jordan. We are comparing apples and oranges when we speak about the region as a whole when it comes to the economic picture. However, the two are complementary in practical terms in that the security realities on the ground affect the extent of the economic opportunity that can be reaped. Also, especially with the Gulf, which is critical in terms of foreign direct investment, wheeling the global economy, oil prices and so on, there is a clear trade-off. If you have a foreign policy that is inimical to their interests, they have learned over the last few years how to bite back. The Biden Administration have certainly learned over the last three-ish years that you have to play ball; it is not just a question of them following orders anymore.



The policy that we pursue in the security space is very much linked to our economic relationship with the region's critical economic players. There is a certain complementarity between the wealthier countries in the region and what is possible for countries like Egypt, or even Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, in terms of reconstruction and so on. Egypt has to make, I think, \$47 billion in repayments—it is 25% of the country's total external debt—and \$6.3 billion is interest payments alone. It is spending the majority of its budget on paying back debt—it is a disaster. That is over 400% of its IMF quota. The only way it is realistically going to survive is ultimately with hand-outs from the Gulf, which the Gulf states currently don't want to give because they want it to devalue its currency so they can get assets at a 25% discount. That makes perfect sense, but if Egypt defaults, which it probably will at some point—I defer to John on all things Egyptian—that is not good for us. It is not good for us from a security point of view if Egypt becomes an Islamist country again or goes into some sort of turmoil.

There is a relationship between the economic and security that we need to think more carefully about. If there is to be a British Middle East strategy, which would be an incredibly welcome prospect, you should put some thought into precisely how the two are interlinked, both politically and on the ground.

Q94 Royston Smith: John, can I ask you about Arab populations as citizens, the way we treat them and how we attempt to impose our values and democracy when intervening in the Middle East in the way we have? Libya is a great example. I suppose that as a country we felt at the time that we were doing the right thing. History will judge us one way or the other, but 10-plus years on it doesn't look like it has been terribly successful. What is your take on, first, our involvement and, secondly, what is going to happen to Libya in the future?

John Casson: I go back to saying that we don't get to determine the outcomes on our own in any country. Middle Eastern countries have gone wrong when we have intervened on the ground. We had boots on the ground in Iraq, we left well alone in Yemen and we intervened from the air in Libya. It is costly and hard, but in a way the easy thing to do is the first phase—military action. Reflecting on our experience in Libya and everywhere else, I would say that we need a much deeper, more profound understanding, a theory of change and a theory of stability. A quick-fix military intervention in Libya on its own didn't work. That does not mean that those things are or are not part of the solution. A state-state securocratic approach—a great game approach—on its own is not going to engender deep stability in the region, which would turn it from a region that exports problems to a region that exports opportunities and partnerships to us.

To go back to your previous question, Mr Smith, sometimes the things that are driving our behaviour are much less profound and much less strategic than even the ones that you offered. One of the things that is not stated clearly often enough is that a lot of our behaviour towards Saudi Arabia is not about huge investment opportunities or about managing



extremism; it is about our need to keep income for BAE Systems because it is so important to the British defence industry.

In terms of the general tenor of our approach and the way we seek influence in the region, my experience is that our Ministers are generally uncomfortable with difficult conversations and shy away from them. Not being prepared to have an uncomfortable conversation is a symptom of being leveraged by another state. One area that I would quite like to get into if we can, Chair, is diplomatic tactics and whether we have a lot of power or not as much power we would like. We are not using the power we have effectively and in a savvy way. I don't think we really understand our power, and we don't deploy it for results.

Chair: I suspect that might be exactly where Graham takes you: tactics in the Middle East.

- Q95 **Graham Stringer:** The question I was going to ask, which I will sort of ask, is what our attitude, tactics and strategies should be towards Iran. You have both fairly comprehensively answered that question, though I would like your answers developed a bit on what we should do about Iran's nuclear programme. That has not been touched on as much. I would also like to follow up the point John was making. Sometimes in these sessions it feels as though we are at the starting point—for instance, what attitudes we should have to Egypt. In the last 20 years we have fired cruise missiles into Libya, we have marginally decided not to attack Syria, and with the Americans we have invaded Iraq. What do those events leave in the mind of people in the Middle East and north Africa in terms of their attitude to this country?

John Casson: One thing we should avoid is making sweeping generalisations about 500 million people, but I think there is a lot of cynicism about our approach and our motivations. It goes back to the lack of consistency. People will take you telling them things that they don't like and disagreeing with them if you consistently are prepared to stick with your position over the course of a generation.

One of the things that is ineffective about the nature of our diplomatic engagement is that we tend to pitch up and say one thing, then if the other side generates heat or leverage on us, or if three months move on and another issue is top of the agenda, they don't hear from us any more about the thing that we raised three months before. They quickly conclude that we can be pushed and bullied off a position and that we are not serious about it. It invites the partners and the people we are dealing with on the other side to push us around. To take a very small example of the case of Alaa Abdel Fattah, who is a British national and political prisoner in Egypt, in a way, it is a sort of textbook case of doing all the wrong things in trying to influence Egypt and trying to influence another Government.

For example, we do not think about how to use access and political conversations for leverage. We tend to pitch up and think that if we are nice and friendly and call people our friends and our partners that they will then decide to help us. Actually, what that tells them is that they do not



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need to help us. They think, "They're not generating leverage, and they're not making life uncomfortable for us." The Prime Minister went to the COP summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, gave President Sisi the one thing he wanted, which was a meeting on camera in Sharm el-Sheikh, and then asked him for the release of Alaa Abdel Fattah. The Egyptians already got the thing they wanted from us. We had no leverage. Then they don't have to hear about it again for a long time. Our kind of culture of non-offence, not upsetting people and being seen to say the right thing sacrifices leverage.

Look at the countries of Egypt and Jordan. In Jordan, by far the most influential Brit is not the ambassador; it is the defence attaché. In Egypt, the most influential Brit is not the ambassador; it is the head of the SIS station. When those people go in to see their interlocutors, you can be sure that they are not talking—I mean, I am not sure, but from my experience when the Egyptians are hearing from intelligence and defence channels, when the Chief of Defence Staff or the Defence Secretary rings them up, then this case is of national importance to us and we care about it. If they just hear about it from the ambassador and the Foreign Secretary, they know it is a pantomime, because in a country like Egypt the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is effectively a pantomime that is designed to occupy foreigners and keep them away from the real conversations.

There is another issue of how siloed we are, in that the different bits of Whitehall do not collectively concert themselves for an agreed national interest. We do not even surface or name the fact that the interests of BAE Systems or SIS or the Ministry of Defence are contradicting and impeding what might be an agreed country strategy that the Foreign Office or No. 10 are trying to operate towards a country.

When I was in Egypt, I had a big problem. For aviation security reasons, we closed flights to Sharm el-Sheikh for three years. The Egyptians believed that I had personally done it to spite them for political reasons. They made my life hell as ambassador and they made me spend my every waking moment working on the Department for Transport to get the aviation security sorted out.

Here, we have got Britain's most fundamental right under the Vienna convention of diplomatic access being denied. We are not being treated as a serious country and allowed access to the British national in prison. And the Egyptian ambassador in London is welcomed cordially. I mean, I was on the Foreign Office website, and I saw Lord Ahmad calling him a friend, the other day.

We are not prepared to use the leverage we have. We are siloed. When I was in Egypt, I decided that the generational play, where Britain's real added value and USP aligned with what would really make a difference over the generational timeframe in Egypt, was school reform. We had lots of expertise; we didn't have any development budget in Egypt. How was I going to get myself a seat at the table?

I thought that Christmas had come early when, at a random G7 summit, the Chancellor said he was going to give Egypt a £200 million loan



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guarantee. It was given to the Department for International Development to work it through the World Bank. I could not get the Treasury or DFID to say, "Give me three months to turn that into leverage and I will say to the Egyptians, 'You will get this if you put us at the table—part of the central story on school reform.'"

The lack of any kind of integration in Whitehall and discipline to act on a concerted national strategy, the culture of non-offence and not understanding how to create leverage by making things uncomfortable, rather than thinking that if we make things comfortable we are generating leverage, is a problem. And I think there is a lack of attention span. It takes senior political attention to keep coming back to an issue if you're going to convince the other side that you're serious.

I think that there are a whole series of things that we could do, if you just want to get into recommendations, to use our power in a savvier way, because at the moment we are being leveraged often and we are not leveraging.

- Q96 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Jay, on the nuclear programme of Iran, what do you think our policy and attitude should be to that programme in the future?

Jay Mens: To use John's language of pantomime, I think that the Iranian nuclear programme has been the most extraordinary pantomime in modern Middle Eastern history, as a distraction from literally everything else that Iran has done to forward its strategic interests over the last decades.

Critics of the nuclear deal argued, among other criticisms, that it would reduce the amount of interest in proxies, which is ultimately the central issue. That is the cornerstone of Iran's military doctrine, which is forward defence, defence in depth, keeping the West and Israel in particular busy, and the Gulfies busy, with their own borders and their own assets, so the Iranian homeland cannot be targeted, militarily or otherwise.

Now we have reached a point where forward defence, as a doctrine or as a strategy, has reached its zenith. The Shi'a crescent has effectively been completed. Iran has a very effective supply line running through Iraq and Syria all the way to Lebanon. It is starting to seep and knock at the door of Jordan now, which I think is something that we will be discussing over the next five to 10 years. Lebanon is basically an operational node for the rest of the fun.

However, to zoom back to the nuclear programme, I think it is very difficult to argue that it is not a fait accompli. I think that over the next 365 days Iran has the best window ever to just move ahead with a nuclear test, knowing that there is almost nothing that it can do that will provoke a response from the United States. If Joe Biden is the President that actually takes military action against a nuclear programme—

- Q97 **Graham Stringer:** Would you put Israel in with the United States? Do you think there could be a reaction from Israel?



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Jay Mens: As it stands, I cannot speak fully to the matter, but to the best of my knowledge Israel is on stand-by for a contingency in Lebanon. That is the urgent priority of the Israeli military now, given the fact that Hezbollah is probably a more significant threat in material terms to the state of Israel than a nuclear weapon would be, precisely because the function of a nuclear weapon would be to provide an umbrella to scare off the West from taking action against proxies.

In terms of the Israeli air force, you have a couple of problems. The first is in terms of actual capacity. You would need basically the entire Israeli air force to deal with a Lebanon contingency, because it would also seep into Syria. There is a question of how much support the US would lend in such contingency.

Secondly, in terms of actual strike corridors, one assumes that the Saudis have very little interest in facilitating an Israeli strike—certainly much less of an appetite than they might have had four or five years ago, or even two or three years ago. The other strike path, then, is via north-east Syria and Iraq, which the Iranians have been frantically fortifying for the last year. On practical grounds, I think it would be very difficult for Israel to pull something off by itself, but, again, I am not privy to the full scope of information needed to answer that question.

Chair: We have five minutes left, and I want to bring in both Neil and Fabian.

- Q98 **Neil Coyle:** Jay, you were asked earlier about the influence issue. Is global Britain too weak to even monitor closely enough security events in the region? You said 7 October should be a wake-up call, but was it an aberration or an institutional structural weakness that we did not have any security or intelligence about such a significant attack?

Jay Mens: On that count, it is very hard to beat up on the SIS. If even the Shin Bet, Mossad or the CIA were not able to pick up on that event, I think we can go easy on the services in that department because clearly it was a failure on an innumerable number of levels; there is going to be a very long and gruelling post-mortem on that. In terms of our being surprised, lots of observers—from Sir John Jenkins to myself and others—had a certain sense that the year would end in crisis because we watch Iran's posture so closely, and because it is so telling from troop movements, which you can look at from Discord servers, Telegram and Twitter. You can look at these things and put the pieces of the puzzle together. The problem is in terms of emphasis—where we are looking and what we are looking at—and in terms of broader strategy and concept, because there is clearly, even speaking in distinctly security terms, a bit of a skewed perception. We certainly have the capacity; it is just a question of looking in the right places, I think.

- Q99 **Neil Coyle:** I am a bit concerned about talking about going easy on anyone, given what has happened. Going forward and trying to navigate a role, is it imperative for the UK to have stronger co-operation with other states in the area, or is it that we need to boost our own security



apparatus in the Middle East?

Jay Mens: In practical terms, we can boost ourselves as much as we like, but in terms of getting human intelligence and co-operation on a range of technical issues from signals intelligence to other things, we need the co-operation of our partners, who know the region better than we ever will be able to—certainly Jordan, Egypt, the Saudis and, of course, the Israelis. That is absolutely essential going forward in order to actually have the capacity for that human intelligence to give us a perspective on the region that we will not be able to come to on our own terms. In terms of thinking about things that are around the corner, I have heard from interlocutors about weapons smuggling into the West Bank. You hear things when you put your ear to the region. We need to do that, and to do that we need to work with friends.

Q100 **Fabian Hamilton:** Can I move us on to Turkey? It is sometimes referred to as a MENA country, but it is really not—it spans Europe and the Middle East, but it is increasing its role and its influence, obviously, in the region. John, could you start off by telling us a bit about what you think Turkey's role in the region is, and how we should best engage with Turkey given its increasing influence?

John Casson: I am not sure I am really very qualified to speak about that one. One of the ironies of the way the Foreign Office structures itself is that Turkey doesn't sit in the Middle East and North Africa.

Fabian Hamilton: No, I know.

John Casson: It is striking that Turkey is, in a way, an example of a state whose political economy is quite different. It is not a rentier state in the way that all of what I would call the brittle—harsh, but weak—states of the Middle East and Arab world are.

I will take the opportunity to make a more general point, which is that in any of these situations, the more we can get a textured, specific sense of a country in the way we analyse it and develop expertise, and not just fall back on a narrow, securocratic lens, the more we will leverage the power and influence that we have. What I mean by that is that typically in Whitehall, Turkey, Egypt or any other country will be analysed either through the lens of an intelligence analyst, who sees the Arab world through networks and ideologies, through the diplomatic prism, which is all about the court, the reformers and the reactionaries, who is in and who is out, and who is going to be the next Crown prince, or with an institutional perspective through the lens of a macroeconomist and the financial institutions.

We produce programmes and experts who think about institutions. A new second secretary goes to run a programme in a country on economic reform, and they go and talk to people in the central bank and they get the ambassador to talk to that person's boss. They think that by doing that, they are understanding the country and exercising leverage, but we need a deeper sort of expertise that is much more societal. The institutions of these countries tend to be weak. We think of strong

institutions, but the individual actors in those institutions are in other networks and webs of influence—of family, tribe and other commitments.

Q101 Fabian Hamilton: Sorry to interrupt you, but are you suggesting that we need to look more at the culture? We know the cuisine of Turkey very well in this country, but the culture? Some of its brilliant authors, such as Elif Shafak, come to mind, as does the music, art and education. Is that what we should be more involved in?

John Casson: I would point to two things. The first is the political economy. The best analysis of Egypt is about how a country that is trying to act as a rentier state, with a population that is far bigger than the rents coming in, deals with the budget deficit. Everything to do with its international and internal behaviour stems from that. I know I will sound very old fashioned—like an old Foreign Office buffer—but the other thing is human knowledge of the country. If people are just sitting in Whitehall with glib, securocratic answers, we will not understand how to generate leverage; we will not understand how we are being played. But when you have people who know a country—who have been back, seen how the game is played and seen previous rounds of it—they understand the other networks of influence that people sit in when we are talking to them.

One really striking thing when you read the integrated review is that it drips of something written by someone who has never left the shores of this country. It is entirely self-referential. It is full of muscular language. If you are someone who writes muscular policy papers for a living, if you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. If you are someone who writes muscular, securocratic policy papers for a living, every part of the world looks like something that needs a robust strategy, but there is no textured knowledge of people, societies or events, which is what foreign policy is about. It is entirely innocent of that.

Fabian Hamilton: Is there time for Jay to come in?

Q102 Chair: No. I have one final question for John because I know we are running really late. John, given that you are absolutely right about the fact that we need people within King Charles Street who actually know the region, have a passion for it and understand it, why are you no longer in King Charles Street? Is there anything to say on those final tactical details about how we should be approaching negotiations? Do you want to leave us with any tactics that you wish we were using to get the leverage we need?

John Casson: I had a fantastic 20 years in the Foreign Office; I do not begrudge a moment of it. Out of my attempt to be as human as I could when doing the job, I got a different sense of vocation, which was to be alongside a different type of people in a different way—not sitting in the centre of power disposing insight from a great height. It is purely about my own personal vocation.

I will run very quickly through the things I would love to see you recommending. Please tell the Foreign Office to never again use in any answer to Parliament the phrases, “We are working hard,” and “We have



raised.” They are signals that we measure ourselves by input, and that doing and saying the right thing will not get us into trouble, instead of understanding how to influence events. We should articulate in a way that builds a national consensus that can last for a generation and set strategic priorities about the kind of behaviour we want to see from states, and the kind of internal set-up that will make them resilient, strong and effective partners, not brittle partners. That needs to be about not just political leadership and Whitehall expertise, although we need a Whitehall centre that brings together the different bits of Whitehall. At the moment, they are so siloed that they squander our leverage.

Parliament has a role to play, however; business has a role to play. We need to build national consensus. The APPG set-up is entirely counterproductive. In my experience, it is another thing that is used by other countries to leverage us; it is not used by us to leverage and build national consensus about British theories of change. Parliamentarians do not turn up on APPG trips articulating and leveraging on behalf of Britain. They tend to come back leveraging on behalf of the country they have visited. I can see that that is not a very welcome statement.

Chair: No, I think there is a lot of agreement. I would say that they are not all the same—but yes.

John Casson: We need to pay much more attention to coalitions. We ask, “What is Britain’s policy?” but what is the collective policy of our most like-minded friends, that will magnify and amplify our influence? We need to develop a different type of expertise—the more profound expertise of people who know the region, have relations with it and return to the same countries over and over again, and who are capable of thinking in terms of rounded societal analysis, so that when there is a Gaza crisis, the person writing the paper for the Foreign Secretary about the two-state solution is someone who has actually lived there, who knows the region, who has been through the previous four Gaza wars and who has seen how they always end with a pause that becomes a ceasefire, which becomes something else.

Chair: Brilliant. On that note, thank you both ever so much for your time. It really is appreciated.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Anoush Ehteshami, Professor Simon Mabon and Professor Christopher Phillips.

Chair: I am so sorry that we are running later than hoped—onwards and upwards. I will ask each of you to introduce yourselves briefly, so that we have it on the record, and we will go from there.

Professor Phillips: I am Professor Chris Phillips. I am Professor of International Relations at Queen Mary University of London.



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Professor Ehteshami: I am Professor Anoush Ehteshami. I am Professor of International Relations at Durham University.

Professor Mabon: I am Professor Simon Mabon—apologies for my sore throat. I am Professor of International Politics at Lancaster University.

Chair: Brilliant. Thank you all for joining us. Graham, over to you.

Q103 **Graham Stringer:** You listened to the previous session, Professor Mabon. Do you think it is possible for this country to choose countries in North Africa and the Middle East to focus on? Is that a sensible use of resources? If it is, which countries should we focus on, where would we have most influence?

Professor Mabon: That is a good question. There are a couple of things at play. One is that there are obvious historical, political, cultural and economic relationships in operation that go back a century. Some have ebbed and flowed, and some are stronger than others, but there are deep ties. With states such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Israel, there are long histories that should be used, cultivated and remembered. They give us opportunities to exert influence in the region and to encourage economic investment in the UK. We have seen that a lot recently with the Gulf states.

There are the historical links, which are really important, but there are then the more pragmatic, more instrumental types of relationships that the UK should be trying to cultivate with the more influential, powerful states in the region, with which we do not necessarily have the same level of historical ties but which are important actors in and of their own right. In a number of cases, they cross over, so we see historical links, economic interest and pragmatic engagement coming together with Saudi, Qatar, the UAE and so on. I would argue that we have to lean into the historical links and the reserves of cultural, political and economic capital that we have.

In answer to the second part of your question, therefore, I would say that Saudi, Qatar, the UAE and Israel are the obvious players that we should welcome and deepen our relations with, but that should not be at the expense of other states where there are opportunities for the UK to use its influence through softer mechanisms. The British Council is hugely valuable and hugely celebrated. People I speak to across the region are very positive about things like the British Council. I would argue that that gives us opportunities in less obvious ways than more formal diplomatic links.

Q104 **Royston Smith:** Should we in the UK be more realistic and less ambitious about our engagement with the Middle East?

Professor Phillips: That was pretty much the argument made in a book that Michael Stephens and I edited a couple of years ago. We very much took that position, which was to look at the geopolitics of the region at the moment. The Middle East is a region in which the West is now less influential than it has been historically—probably, the West is at its least

influential position in that region since the end of the cold war—and Britain is in a weaker position in that Western alliance, whether we like it or not, due to socioeconomic and political decisions made in the UK in recent years.

To link to the question that was asked before, we have limited resources now and shifting global priorities, and the Middle East is less of a priority than it once was. That does not mean that we should disengage completely from the region. Obviously, things like security, economics and values, as Simon was mentioning, will be important, but we have to be realistic, as you say. We have a limited pool of resources and we cannot be everywhere at once; that has been the attempted approach by various British Governments of recent years—trying to spread ourselves incredibly thinly and not being very effective or influential. The main argument of the book that Mike and I edited was that we should be more targeted and selective, but effective, in where we engage.

Q105 **Royston Smith:** Which regions do you think we should be in?

Professor Phillips: I will elaborate on what Simon said. We already have a hierarchy, so we focus on the Gulf—that is absolutely of No. 1 economic value to the UK. That does not mean that we should give up completely on our principles when it comes to some of the less favourable activities of some of those states, but we have to be realistic and recognise that our ability to influence their behaviour is limited. We get significant economic and security benefit from engaging with them, and we should continue to do so. There is, as Simon said, Israel, and, as was mentioned earlier, Turkey, as well as, for different reasons, Iran, because of the security threat. But there are also regions that we should not be focusing on that much, in my view; we have to accept that we have very limited leverage in the country that I focus on, which is Syria—likewise, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya and, actually, Iraq. If we have to focus our limited pools in certain areas, I think we should avoid those areas.

Finally, Mike and I made another big point in our book, to go slightly to what Simon said: we should focus on particular historical relationships with perhaps less glamorous countries like Jordan, Oman and Egypt, where we still have some influence. We should make use of that influence as and when we can.

Q106 **Chair:** May I challenge you on one point, which kind of goes to John's argument? I am not convinced that the UK has diminished ability to affect change in the Middle East, not least because it does not matter which country I go to—whether it is the King of Jordan I meet, or a junior official in a Department—they want the UK in the room. The UK is always seen as incredibly important; I would argue that the problem is not that we do not have the influence, but that we are not leveraging it. That goes to exactly John's point: because we run around the world saying everyone is our friend and not being tough or delivering tough messages, there are not many repercussions for not doing what we ask. We do not hold to account. The hostages example is the best one, and this Committee has been so critical of our Government, but there is not a



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country I go to in the world where they don't say, "We want the UK in the room. The UK matters." If we were to actually be tough and do tough diplomacy, we could potentially achieve something, but we are not willing to use the leverage we have.

Professor Phillips: I would question whether there is a question of cause and effect there. Are we not being hard and using that leverage, because there is a limited will at political level to do so? I have not seen it, so, as for you, it is a question of whether there is the ability or a lack of will.

Q107 **Royston Smith:** I do not think anything you are saying is wrong; of course, some of it is subjective and an opinion. We constantly talk about global Britain. I was very excited about the term and what it might mean, but it did not actually mean anything in the end, as far as I can see.

Bob Seely: I agree with that.

Royston Smith: Thanks, Bob. You were talking about where you may or may not put the UK's leverage. Somewhere like Yemen is different, perhaps, from somewhere like Libya, because of the death and destruction and the nature of a failed state like Yemen, which has impacts on Saudi Arabia, a country where you think we should be putting our efforts. So how do you square that circle?

Professor Phillips: Sorry, in the sense that Yemen has a security effect on a close ally and Libya does not? Is that your question?

Q108 **Royston Smith:** Well, yes, and of course because of what is happening and has happened in Yemen. There is a humanitarian issue as well. What we sometimes get criticised for in this country and elsewhere, don't we, is that one Arab life is worth something different depending on where it is, and Yemen is one of those places where it would appear that most people just said, "That is a complicated issue. We'll just park it."

Professor Phillips: Yes, but I am not sure I particularly follow. That has been the case in multiple humanitarian crises across the Middle East. You could talk about Iraq or Gaza, and there is still a civil war going on in Libya. There are humanitarian crises across the region. Yemen got more attention, and Britain got more criticised in the UK press, because of our arms relationship with two of the combatants in that conflict.

Royston Smith: We have already talked about how we are protecting BAE Systems.

Professor Phillips: Exactly, so there is a more direct economic link to Saudi Arabia, and that provokes criticism of the UK's position in Yemen. I suppose the argument that Mike and I would make is, what influence does Britain actually have within that conflict to change the character of it? I am not saying that we should disengage from it. I think we should support humanitarian relief efforts, as we do, but in terms of a focus of attention, which is what was questioned before, we have to recognise that our leverage is hugely limited on a conflict like that.

Royston Smith: I do understand. Yesterday, I think someone said, "If



everything is a priority, then nothing is." So I understand what you are saying.

Q109 Bob Seely: I want to follow up what Royston was saying, but can I give an opinion first of all? All states have limited resources. Being very subjective here, I am a bit exhausted by hearing this "nation on the decline" stuff all the time. If you go back to the 1920s, we tried governing Iraq by using the RAF to put down rebellions, in order to save money by not having a standing army there. There were all the discussions in the 1930s, and indeed the 1950s, about how many troops you need to govern the Middle East out of Cairo, in Egypt.

Like every other state, we have always had limited resources. I get the fact that you want to prioritise; I think you always have to prioritise—that is incredibly sensible. The most important thing I have heard in the last hour was when John said that we do not do diplomacy well enough and that we need to really think about how we can do diplomacy and influence better. Do you think that that argument is important for understanding the Middle East, and do you agree with it? How would we do diplomacy better, potentially focusing on the areas that you mentioned? Syria has never been a focus of ours; it has been Ottoman and then French, and we have never really had a relationship with it *per se*.

Professor Phillips: First, I entirely agree with what John said. The whole mantra of our book was, "Do less, but better." It is very much a case of listening to the diplomats' expertise, because they are the ones in the rooms that will listen. The kind of picture we are giving you is the bigger, bird's eye view geopolitical argument.

My criticism, as such, of the UK in recent years is that we have not made those strategic decisions to deprioritise some areas. We actually did pour huge resources into the Syria conflict, without having much of a positive effect. People can debate whether that was the right or wrong thing to do, but it was not an effective use of resources in that sense.

Just to clarify, I am not suggesting that the UK is irrelevant in any way. However, I am saying that, if you look at the broader foreign policy questions the UK is facing at the moment, the Middle East is falling down the priority agenda. Other parts of the world are taking up bandwidth, and the UK needs to recognise that, perhaps be less ambitious in the Middle East and make sure that, when it does engage in the Middle East, it engages in an effective and directed way.

Q110 Bob Seely: Just to follow that up, when you talk about Syria and resources, are you talking about humanitarian, security agency or military? Secondly, when it comes to resourcing, is it that the Gulf is our fourth biggest trading partner and that, person for person, people there are, just economically, of incredible value to us, not only because they buy British stuff, but because a lot of Gulfies go to British universities—lots of Bahrainis and Saudis do, especially to places like King's? When you talk about focusing, is this for economic reasons and for some security



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relationships we develop on the back of that as well?

Professor Phillips: I entirely agree with your assessment of the Gulf. I would add to what Simon was saying about soft power resources like the British Council. We are a bit biased on this panel, but we would also add that the university sector is a very important soft power institution that the UK has. We have a huge number of students from the Middle East coming over to the UK, mostly from the Gulf. They get a very positive experience of the UK and take it back, and they often go into quite senior positions in Government in the Gulf. It is important to recognise that, if you damage that sector, you are actually damaging a foreign policy tool. It is the same with cuts to the British Council or cuts to the BBC; it is part of the same issue.

I am conscious that I have spoken a lot more than my colleagues, so I will just wrap up the point on Syria. I think you need to look at what you can effect successfully. Prior to the conflict with ISIS, which is a different issue—I think we were actually quite effective against ISIS—the UK put a lot of resources, and diplomatic resources, into the crisis on the security side of things—unsuccessfully. I would say that that was at the cost of the humanitarian budget, which could have been higher and could have focused more on things like supporting refugees in the UK, Europe and elsewhere. I believe that would have had a more positive effective on the UK's reputation in the region.

Chair: I will move us across to Fabian, but I would just make the brief point on diplomacy that sometimes you cannot measure the fact that you have managed to prevent things from getting worse. On Syria, no country has ever raised the amount of money that was raised in one day here in London at the Syria conference for the conflict. It was a major achievement.

In terms of the diplomatic track, the Syrian opposition would have had no opportunity to present themselves the way they did, if the UK had not done what it had on Syria. Fundamentally, in terms of measuring the ability of the UK to ensure that those peace talks took place in the way they did, that is incredibly difficult to put in tangible terms.

So I would argue that, while we may not be able to say that Britain brought Assad to justice and that, as a result, he is now in front of The Hague, there are very difficult but important things to measure, where the UK has actually played a substantial role in stopping things getting worse. Again, on the Caesar files, which played an enormous part, without the UK we would not know just how bad things were on the ground in Syria.

- Q111 **Fabian Hamilton:** Dr Ehteshami, I appreciate that you have not spoken. I want to talk about Libya for a minute. If we are looking at priorities, then Libya must be a really important priority for us in Europe and in the UK, especially since it is 12 years now since the overthrow of Gaddafi. Since 2016, the UK has been the penholder for Libya at the Security Council. Yet, Libya has been used as a proxy—it has two separate Governments—by various state actors who want to use it for their own



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benefit, especially to exploit the oil. In the meantime, of course, we have seen the massive flow of migrants. Could you perhaps give us an assessment of how the UK could better perform its role as the penholder at the United Nations?

Professor Ehteshami: I am very pleased you raised the United Nations. I was listening to Chris, and I agree with much of what he said, but I do not think that the UK, as a permanent member of the Security Council, has the luxury of pick and mix. It really has to be in a position to respond as constructively as possible to crises that the United Nations has to confront, and this is a typical crisis. I think that the problem with Libya is that, when Humpty Dumpty broke, nobody went to his aid to put him back together. Opportunities were there for the first two years post Gaddafi to try to create a Government of national unity, to try to inject a bit more diversity into the economy and also to try to encourage it to be co-opted into the Arab ranks—as you know, under Gaddafi, Libya was very much out on a limb by itself. I fear that the West did not do any of that.

As we moved on to other priorities, other patches of concern and so on, we let other actors—Russia and the Emirates being good examples of this, as well as Egypt and Türkiye of course—become these external actors that have penetrated the very fabric of Libya and have now created this duality of power in the country. That makes our position more or less redundant, because we cannot get very far without getting these other parties to at least reach a degree of consensus around what a united Libya might look like.

Q112 **Fabian Hamilton:** Can I interrupt you a minute? What do you think the role of Khalifa Haftar is? He is being backed by various state actors as well. If he was removed from the picture, would it be easier to reunite the country?

Professor Ehteshami: I think that the Libyans would welcome his removal from the picture, for all sorts of reasons. I have never advocated having strongmen in charge of civil societies, and unfortunately we see an example of that here—an unaccountable military leader taking charge of half of this potentially prosperous state and holding the rest of it hostage. I am afraid that that is where we are, but to get him off the hook, we need Egypt, Türkiye and Russia to play ball, and I do not see any of that.

Partly, it is not just about Egypt, Mr Hamilton; it is also about these wider sets of crises that the region faces, and the difficulty of putting energy into one at the expense of another. We need a much more strategic and comprehensive approach to these things. I would argue, perhaps slightly against the current of our discussion here, that we should not pick countries but agendas and issues that are of concern to all of these countries, but also of vital importance to us—whether that is the environment, security, governance, migration or economic development. These are problems that even our friends in the GCC in the Gulf face, so we need to have much more of a comprehensive approach to crises. I think that befits a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.



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Q113 Fabian Hamilton: Do you agree that it would help if all five permanent members agreed on the way forward for Libya, together with the Libyan people? At the moment, they are backing different sides, aren't they?

Professor Ehteshami: I think it would be almost impossible to get the five to agree on a single vision for Libya. My worry is that we are not even talking about Libya any longer.

Q114 Brendan O'Hara: Building on what you were saying there, Professor Ehteshami, and it is timely given that it is the 75th anniversary of the genocide convention and the UNHCR. What do you consider to be more important? Is it security and economic interests, or should the UK be more focused on human rights and bolstering the international rules-based order? And in 2023, does morality have a role in UK foreign policy? If it does not, should it?

Professor Ehteshami: These are fantastic essay questions. I will answer the latter first. I think that foreign policy without morality is vacuous. You need to have values imbued. The conversation can be focused around the idea of smart power; it is not about soft power, but how you deploy your resources strategically in your national interest. Smart power includes a recognition of what you hold dear as a nation state, and how you want to project it internationally. I fear, as John was saying in the previous session, that we are not doing that extremely well at present. Values do have a place, but it is how you play it. If you cherry-pick the application of values, then obviously you are going to find all sorts of difficulties in trying to project this uniformity of being a good officer of the international community.

I am sure that there are problems with centring values in the system. To talk about democracy, for example, in this region is something that will not go down very well. But if you talk about good governance, transparency and the rule of law, those are phrases that are not as loaded as something like democracy might be, and they provide you with a broader platform through which you can engage with the parties concerned.

Your first question about rights is really important. It goes back to the same application of smart power. The United Kingdom, having set up and been party to this organisation we call the United Nations, has to adhere as much as possible to its principles, but also to the values and spirit of what makes those things cardinal. We talk about the universal declaration of human rights—there are Muslim countries that question some of the substance of that. When we call it universal, we have to be concerned about how objective that is in reality. Once we recognise that the world is now much more diverse than when these structures were created, we can begin to play and apply expertise and the power we hope and assume the UK has in these fora.

Professor Mabon: I echo much of what my colleague Anoush has said. I do not think they are necessarily mutually exclusive, though. If used in the right way, values can serve the national interest and can be used as a way



of improving the capacity for leverage. It has to go back to what Anoush was just saying—you cannot just cherry-pick the application of those concepts. You cannot just selectively deploy democracy or the concept of democracy when you want to target it at a specific state with which you have some fractious relations. You have to be consistent with the deployment, the use and the language around all of these concepts and terms, which can then help you to create a coherent policy that can ultimately serve the national interest. Without that, charges of hypocrisy can easily be levied at you. As we have seen in recent weeks, the absence of morality, or the perceived absence of morality, in a particular foreign policy agenda has opened up states to criticism. I would strongly argue that morality has a role to play, but morality and values feed into the construction of national interest in the longer term, which can then be very neatly linked into the ability of a state to exert influence, and indeed leverage.

Q115 Brendan O'Hara: Taking that forward, and linking morality, values and so on back to what Fabian was talking about, what approach do you think the UK could take towards being part of building a regional security architecture in Libya and elsewhere in the region? Is there a role for the UK? If so, what is that role?

Professor Ehteshami: We all have views on that one, I think.

Brendan O'Hara: I look forward to hearing them.

Professor Ehteshami: For me, the answer is absolutely yes, but it cannot be done in isolation. The United Kingdom cannot create a reconstituted structure; it needs to work with the kind of allies, partners and so on that we have already talked about. But it needs much more than that. Here is the Brexit rub: while the United Kingdom was in the European Union, it already had a collective through which it could act. It now has to deal with NATO, it has to deal with the European Union. It has to deal with the United States, and it has to deal with the permanent members of the Security Council themselves.

While we have been sleeping, the Chinese have put forward their regional security architecture and the Russians have put forward their regional security architecture. The Russian one was actually deposited at the United Nations as a document, but when you read it, you realise that it is like a sieve—it is totally dysfunctional. However, the Chinese one has a degree of coherence to it that offers a very different perspective on what regional security might mean compared with what we put forward. It is important, if we are thinking along those lines, to engage with the Chinese perception of peace, security, good governance and so on. We may not agree with everything that the Chinese put forward, but they have put forward an agenda that we can engage with, rather than the Russian one.

So there are opportunities therein; it is a question, as Simon was saying, of where our national interest lies. Like him, I am of the view that regional prosperity, security and stability are some of our core, fundamental interests in this region.



Professor Phillips: I don't disagree. At the moment, the region is leading itself in a way that it has not for a long time. The security agreements that are coming into place have effectively been invited in. China's presence has been invited in by a more assertive and independent Gulf—a more assertive and independent Egypt and Israel, even—than we have seen in the past 20 years. So the extent to which those regional powers actually want the UK to play a prominent role in regional security infrastructure is questionable. It is not the case, as perhaps it looked in around 2003—the height of the war on terror—that Western actors could realistically hope to project a particular security understanding on to the region. It is far more complex now. To reiterate my point, that is not to say that we should shy away from engaging with it, but we have to recognise that there are serious limitations on the West's role in the region and the UK's role within the West. That is an important starting point.

Professor Mabon: I completely agree. The really important thing, though, is to listen. If we would have had these conversations with colleagues and actors in the Gulf three, four, five or 10 years ago, we would have heard very divergent views about what a regional security architecture would look like for the Saudis and other Arab Gulf states. We would have had a regional security architecture that would be driven, led and enforced by the United States, whereas the Iranians would say, "We want a very different model of regional security architecture that is free from outside interference."

Those dynamics have now shifted, of course, but I think the role of the UK must be to listen to what is being said by voices in the region, including about their relationships with outside powers. The UK must acknowledge that and wield the leverage that we have from having a clear, coherent foreign policy. Also, if I may, the role of the UK must be to dispel some of the deeply problematic assumptions and narratives that are being made and reinforced in global politics. I fear I must also say that one of those narratives was articulated in the previous session—namely, that of a Shi'a crescent. That is a deeply problematic, deeply orientalist—verging on the Islamophobic—way of articulating the construction of regional politics.

Q116 **Royston Smith:** Anoush, can I first agree with you? You are worried that we are not even talking about Libya any more, and there are other areas too. I come back to Yemen as an example. What do you, or any of the three of you, think would be the diplomatic solution in Yemen? What would that look like? Would it be carving up the north and south? Would it be bringing in the Houthis, in the way that Hezbollah has been brought in in Lebanon? That would be the Iranians in the middle of the political solution. How would you see that playing out?

Professor Ehteshami: Once there is resolution between Iran and Saudi Arabia, there might be a resolution in Yemen. I think that those two countries are very polarising in the way that they have acted in Lebanon. This goes back to the discussions about Iran's proxies and so on. The Houthis have a place; they are not planted there by Iran—Iran exploits the position of that community in Yemen. It is a question of trying to manage their aspirations with the broader concerns that we have about Yemen.



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But I have to tell you that, actually, there is a substantial majority in Yemen that wants a two-state solution, and not a single Yemen any longer, and there are regional actors that would also like to see that for their own interests. So, in a sense, I think that we need to understand, from the Yemeni perspective, what the ideal type of Yemen would be, before we can even begin to act on it. But it is a good thing that Iran and Saudi Arabia are in dialogue about their bilateral relations, but also about broader issues to do with Yemen and Iraq, in particular, which is the other broken country just across the water. I generally do not see an immediate solution to the Yemen crisis, and the humanitarian crisis, as you know, is actually worsening by the day.

Professor Mabon: A few years ago I sat in a Committee Room just down the hall with Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, the leader of the Southern Transitional Council. He was greeted with rapturous applause and was a very vocal exponent of a split between north and south. One of the positive things that has come out of the Iran-Saudi talks is a kick-start of the Saudi desire to engage with the Houthis. That is happening. I imagine that will, at some point in the coming months, reach a successful conclusion, barring a black swan event. The line of division we are seeing in Yemen and how that resonates regionally is between the Saudis and the Emiratis over the idea of a coherent Yemen. The extent to which the Emiratis are backing the Southern Transitional Council in its secessionist aspirations and the extent to which the Saudis and, I would argue, the Iranians want to see a coherent and singular Yemen, I would argue that that would be the interesting line of division.

Professor Phillips: Can I add a further point to that? Whether it is partitioned or not, the Houthis have control over north Yemen and, actually, you have a kind of coherent state emerging there. South Yemen is nothing like that. The Southern Transitional Council does not have anywhere near that level of power. You have lots of different actors there, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula and groups that are loyal to ISIS. It is highly plausible that south Yemen could fragment and, whatever happens in north Yemen with the deal between Saudi and Iran over the Houthis, south Yemen continues to be a failed state for quite a long time.

Chair: Bob, and then we need to wrap up by quarter past.

Q117 **Bob Seely:** I have three questions—very short answers, please. You talk about orientalism, Simon. It is our Sunni colleagues and friends who talk about the Shi'a crescent. That is my question for you.

Anoush, we are marked by Western internationalism, liberal internationalism—like it or not—and the Russians are horrible realists. I hope that is not too much of a misrepresentation. Where do Arab states fit in the internationalism versus realism outlook on life? What is their approach?

Just on Yemen, Mahra tribes were quite pro-British once upon a time. Where are they in the whole Yemen make-up?



Professor Mabon: Sure. Self-orientalism is a real thing. The line of division along sect-based divisions is a deeply problematic one, but it is being perpetuated overwhelmingly for political reasons. I just did a survey in Lebanon and Iraq about lines of communal difference. Overwhelmingly, the respondents came back to say Sunni/Shi'a, it does not matter; it is about rich and poor and Government and Opposition figures.

Professor Ehteshami: Virtually every Arab state—bar Syria I suspect, but even the Syrians buy into the liberal international order because they benefit from it—buys into the international capitalist order because they are co-opted within it. However, when it comes to engagement with it, at times they prefer the Russian approach than the Western approach.

Q118 **Bob Seely:** Because it comes with less morality—fewer moral hang-ups and anchors?

Professor Ehteshami: Because of the point of hypocrisy in Western positions to justify their own immorality, if you like, in policy. I am afraid that it is apparent in every crisis that we come to. Virtually today, the Russians are engaging in the region on the Gaza war in ways that they have not done before; in the Gulf they are doing that. That should be a signal to us that the messaging that we project is not being received in the way that it is being projected, and that we need to be very mindful of what adversaries—competitors—such as Russia might be telling them, which could be more persuasive than our message.

Professor Phillips: There are people far more qualified than me to speak on Yemen. My understanding is that I do not actually know whether the Mahra tribe still hold a close place for the UK in their hearts, but they are a weaker actor in what is a fragmented political landscape now.

Chair: Brilliant. With that, I say thank you ever so much to all of you.