

# Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 26 March 2024

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 250-304

### Witnesses

[I](#): Will Todman, deputy director and senior fellow at the Middle East Program, CSIS, Urban Coningham, research analyst and course lead at RUSI, Jonathan Wilks, former UK Ambassador to Qatar (2020-2023), Iraq (2017-2019), Oman (2014-2017), Syria (2012-2014), and Professor Gareth Stansfield, Professor of Middle East Politics, and former director of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at The University of Exeter.

[II](#): Dr Radwan Masmoudi, President at Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, Dr Shana Cohen, director at Think-Tank for Action on Social Change, and Amine Ghoulidi, Visiting Fellow at the Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at Heritage Foundation.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Will Todman, Urban Coningham, Jonathan Wilks and Professor Gareth Stansfield.

**Chair:** Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are continuing our inquiry into the Middle East and North Africa, looking specifically at the Levant and North Africa. We have a fabulous, big panel today. Jonathan Wilks, would you be kind enough to introduce yourself first?

**Jonathan Wilks:** I am Jon Wilks. I have just retired after 34 years in the FCDO, working largely on the Middle East. Particularly relevant to today is that I was Syria envoy from 2012 to 2014 and ambassador in Iraq from 2017 to 2019.

**Will Todman:** My name is Will Todman. I am a senior fellow and deputy director at the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which is an independent think-tank in Washington DC.

**Urban Coningham:** Hi, I am Urban Coningham, a researcher at the Royal United Services Institute focusing on the Levant region, specifically Jordan and Lebanon.

**Professor Stansfield:** Hello, I am Gareth Stansfield, professor of Middle East politics at the University of Exeter. I have been researching and studying Kurdish politics since 1996, when I first went to the Kurdistan region as a UK adviser to the Kurdish parties.

Q250 **Chair:** Brilliant. Jon, to kick us off, is “the Levant” a helpful phrase, or does it allow people to put all manner of sins and opportunities into one box that essentially misleads us?

**Jonathan Wilks:** It is complicated. Iraq is very often not counted as Levant. Syria and Lebanon are, but then you have Israel-Palestine, which particularly now we are dealing with very much on its own. There is a case for saying that Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have a lot of challenges in common, and it is worth considering them together, but it is debatable whether “Levant” is the right term to cover those countries.

Q251 **Chair:** Urban, we hear a lot about the present state of countries in the Levant. The media like to throw around terms such as “weak”, “failed” and “captured”. Do you think that is a fair assessment?

**Urban Coningham:** We have to be careful about trying to generalise across the whole region. Jon has already mentioned that there are big differences between those countries in it. What unites all four countries we are talking about today are economic difficulties and the presence of Iran, Iranian-backed groups or some form of Iranian interference. I would probably classify them as struggling states and then classify Iraq, Syria and Lebanon as captured states.



Q252 **Chair:** Can you give us a bit more insight into the capture that is taking place?

**Urban Coningham:** Lebanon is the context I am best aware of, so I will start with that. Lebanon is essentially captured by Hezbollah, who have a very deep grip on the political leadership and economic leadership and on matters of justice and accountability—or, in this case, lack of accountability. Their control of centralised power means that they can distribute patronage across the civil service, army and so on, which means that their power incrementally becomes stronger and the capture becomes ossified, if you like.

Q253 **Chair:** Jon, it would be helpful if you could give an overview of the political situation in Iraq currently.

**Jonathan Wilks:** The main issue in Iraq is that, although the system has an element of stability and there is a new set of forces that defend the status quo, it is deeply corrupt and, to an extent, captured, again, by Iran's allies.

I agree with Urban that there are economic problems across the region and Iranian allies across the region, but you have slightly different issues in the different countries. With Iraq, control of corruption is the most important thing. Iraq is obviously the wealthiest of those countries. An element of that wealth is being put to good use, and the security situation is better looked at over the perspective of the last decade. It is still a weak state, but there are some signs that it is stabilising.

Q254 **Henry Smith:** Mr Todman, how have economic difficulties in the countries of the Levant affected their society and politics? On the argument as to whether Iraq is part of the Levant or not, can I add Iraq to that list with Lebanon, Syria and Jordan?

**Will Todman:** Economic issues are really severe, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. Lebanon is now three years into one of the greatest economic collapses in the last 150 years, according to the World Bank. That is playing out in a number of ways. The very functioning of the state is severely undermined, with a lot of civil servants going into work only one day a week. It is unable to provide a safety net for most Lebanese, which means that more than half of Lebanese households are now in poverty.

The situation is even worse for Syrian refugees, 90% of whom are in extreme poverty. In Syria, in many ways, things are the worst that they have been since the outbreak of conflict 13 years ago. Some 16.7 million Syrians are now in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the World Bank. Again, the state is unable to provide for the people. Just before this session, I looked up how much a state salary is in Syria, and it is the equivalent of £10.50 a month. People are unable to access their basic needs. Of course, that increases instability and the presence of different armed groups.

I agree with what Jon said about corruption being the main economic problem in Iraq. It should be a wealthy country—it has one of the highest



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GDPs in the region—yet there are chronic electricity shortages and water shortages. The state is struggling to provide those basic essentials.

Q255 **Chair:** Jon, why have we failed so badly to tackle corruption in Iraq? I say “we”—obviously it is not necessarily our responsibility—but we do have goals to contribute towards that.

**Jonathan Wilks:** There is a big question around that. What can we the UK, or we working with allies or partners on the ground, achieve to fundamentally reform these countries? Of course, we are much less on the ground in Iraq than we were 10 years ago, and we have to be realistic about what can be achieved. The problem we have in general is a political one: there is no real sense of the public or national interest in these countries, so politicians are struggling to resolve their differences through political institutions, as opposed to through armed force or rent-seeking behaviours. So there is a question mark here about us prioritising what we want to achieve, what our interests are and what we think we can bring to the table, but with a realistic recognition that the partnerships on the ground are probably weaker than they have been in the past. Therefore, we must be realistic about what we can achieve.

Q256 **Chair:** Talking of partnerships, in terms of our relationship with the Kurdish people and the Kurdish independent region of Iraq, which is Kurdistan, how would you assess the current success of the partnership between Baghdad and Irbil, and our contribution towards that?

**Jonathan Wilks:** The relationship between Baghdad and Irbil goes through its ups and downs. It is perhaps in a slightly better place than it has been in the past. Our relationship with the Kurds is generally good and is load-bearing—it enables us to achieve something in terms of reform. Ultimately, however, Irbil has to have a good relationship with Baghdad to get its share of the resources and not to be pressured in any way—economically, politically or in security terms. Again, there is a limitation on what we, or we with like-minded, can achieve in terms of sustainable reform. When we look at the partnerships in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, ours with the Kurds in Iraq and some of the forces in Baghdad are probably the best and most effective. Personally, I always feel relatively a little more optimistic about what the UK and like-minded can do in Iraq, as opposed to in some of the other countries we have been talking about.

Q257 **Chair:** Gareth, on our relationship with Kurdistan, would it be wrong to suggest that the Kurds bring more to the table than we do in that relationship?

**Professor Stansfield:** I think that, up until recent years, that has been the case. The Kurds of Iraq were on the frontline in the struggle against Islamic State in a way that was extremely useful and valuable for the UK and the US. Perhaps over the last year, the relationship has changed somewhat. The threat of Islamic State has diminished, although there is still a presence there, and the focus has been very much more upon re-establishing the relationship with Baghdad. With that in mind, the relationship between the Kurdistan region and the UK has become strained. It is not as straightforward as it once was, because the UK is



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committed to the territorial integrity of Iraq and there is currently a very significant dispute between Irbil and Baghdad over the distribution of revenue. As Jon mentioned, that is extremely important to get right and it is highly contested.

So right now, the relationship is strained. I don't think that the KRG really brings as much to the table as it used to, and I think that there is a considerable amount of effort from the UK Government in trying to broker the relationship between Baghdad and Irbil going forward. But that is not straightforward.

**Q258 Chair:** Beyond that brokering role, what more do you think the UK could be doing to support our allies in Kurdistan?

**Professor Stansfield:** There is already a commitment to try and promote better governance in Kurdistan and to further assist the KRG to strengthen its own institutions, improve its transparency and improve its economic performance. As Jon said, corruption is a problem in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan region. There is a significant lack of transparency in how the public budget works, how oil revenue is redistributed and how the political parties work. There is a significant role for the UK, which the UK has been performing, and it continues to do so in trying to improve how the KRG works and improve its stability.

We are also engaged in Peshmerga reform. There are basically two large Peshmerga blocs that are tied to the two principal political parties of Kurdistan, and there has been a significant reform process in place to try and normalise that. That is slow-moving but, again, it is very important as it tackles corruption and improves the security of Iraq and therefore the wider region, and also, to a degree, of the UK. We are working in some key areas but, again, this is a very difficult setting in which to really engage and have traction on the ground that has a meaningful impact.

**Q259 Chair:** Jon, looking at Kurdistan again, you will have had a lot of engagements with Turkish ambassadors in your time. I am interested in how you have seen the relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan shift and where you think the UK can play a more productive role in reducing the tensions between the two communities.

**Jonathan Wilks:** Obviously, Turkey has a vital national interest in anything to do with Kurds, because of its own national security. More generally, when we think of the UK working in and on these countries, we have to look at the big allies in the region that we have to work with and where we have big stakes in relations with those countries. Turkey is clearly one of them.

I have always found Turkish colleagues working on Iraq to be both knowledgeable and representing their national interest, but actually worthwhile partners. While the Kurds have to tread carefully, Irbil has managed its relationship with Turkey in a way that has avoided breakdown or the relationship with Turkey falling off a cliff. When I think of operating with external partners, I think that Turkey has to be one of those when operating on Iraq, including Kurdistan.



Q260 **Chair:** Finally, before I turn to Brendan, Urban, we have been hearing a lot recently about an increased capability of Daesh in Iraq and Syria to conduct operations abroad again, despite it having been reasonably calm over the last few years. Do you think that this is a time for us to make sure that the Kurds don't feel that their only friends are the mountains and that we are doing more with them, or do you think that they have perhaps stood back from some of those operations and that we need to re-engage across the region, not just through the Kurds?

**Urban Coningham:** In general, it is key that we continue our counter-terrorism operations against Daesh and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. As Jon mentioned, the Kurds are one of the most effective forces actually on the ground that are able to do that. The other benefit of engaging with Syria and Iraq is that it is a success story for the region. It is something that advances Britain in the region, in being shown to help with these problems. Whether that is Jordan or Lebanon, they all wish to tackle this as well.

Q261 **Brendan O'Hara:** Apologies for being late; I was in the Chamber. Before I ask about the problems facing Kurds living in other countries in the region, particularly Iran, I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Yazidis. I have recently been to Kurdistan, and there is currently a huge Yazidi population there, living mainly in IDP camps. What pressures is this putting on Kurdistan? Is there movement to try to facilitate a return? Are you experiencing a weariness among the Kurds at having to host such a large community?

**Professor Stansfield:** There is indeed a large IDP community of Yazidis in the Kurdistan region, and they are there at a time when the economy of the region is pretty much broken. The KRG has a very limited public budget now, due to the ongoing budget dispute and the oil and gas dispute going on with the Government of Iraq, so public sector salaries are rarely paid and partially paid, if at all. The public sector projects have basically dried up, and that has a direct impact upon the running and the administration of these camps as well.

On top of that, the Irbil agreement, which was agreed between the Government of Iraq and the KRG to stabilise the Sinjar region, where the Yazidis come from, has not been implemented. At this point, you still have the Sinjar region garrisoned, I guess, by Shi'a militia units, by units of the PKK and their affiliates as well. It is an extremely complicated political/security space.

You have the problem in Kurdistan that you have these very large camps that are very difficult to support now. Even then, you do not really have the opportunity to successfully move the Yazidis back to Sinjar, where they come from.

Is this making problems in the Kurdistan region? It is not making as great a problem as you would perhaps expect it to. I think there is a receptiveness among the Kurdish population to Yazidis for what they have suffered and gone through, and an understanding among Kurds in some





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ways that Yazidis perhaps are the original Kurds, although Yazidis would not necessarily accept that themselves. So there is a sort of romanticised view about looking after them, but that does not take away from the very real economic problems and hardships that having so many refugees on your territory creates when you are suffering so much economic hardship yourself.

Q262 **Brendan O'Hara:** What are the main problems that Kurdish communities living in other countries in the region, including Iran, are facing?

**Professor Stansfield:** The Kurdish situation in Iran is very difficult. Basically, we are dealing with an ethno-nationalist problem in a multinational state, with the dominant nationalist discourse being Persian and with the Kurds sitting uncomfortably alongside that. Alongside that nationalist problem is the fact that Kurds in Iran are largely Sunni, and of course the clerical regime of Iraq is Shi'a. So there is an ethno-nationalist problem and a sectarian problem too.

What we have seen—particularly since 2015 onwards—has been a revitalisation of Kurdish insurgency in Iran, previously through PKK affiliates but increasingly through homegrown Iranian Kurdistan elements, including the Kurdistan Democratic party of Iran, and a hard reaction from the Iranian authorities. They view insurgency and rebellion in Rojhalat, the Kurdistan region of Iran, as potentially a threat to the regime itself, because those are so numerous and in a strategically important location, and that has a direct impact upon the dominant nationalist discourse of Iran. We see an insurgency, we see demonstrations in the east of Iran, in Kurdistan, and we see a very hardline response from the Government, including disproportionately high levels of executions of Kurds in Iran as well.

Q263 **Bob Seely:** Jon, can I check your opinion on one thing because I know that you have been dealing with this issue for many years? How has our diplomatic and military relationship with Iraq been complicated by our role in the last Iraq war, with the US and UK forces there? I am not talking just about the second invasion but about the latter stages of the insurgency when, effectively, during, for example, the Charge of the Knights operation, we slightly sat on our hands and let other people do the work around us. To what extent has that damaged our credibility as a significant power, and to what extent has it provided friction with the current Iraqi regime?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Obviously, everything since 2003 has been completely transformational in terms of our relationship with Iraq because we became, again, part of the system for a short period of time. As you said, there were things that definitely hit our credibility, but there were other aspects that renewed that relationship—not least the fact that we have a large diaspora community of British Iraqis, which actually rebuilt a human bridge between the UK and Iraq.

Looked at in the round, I think Iraqis are pretty good at distinguishing between how the UK interventions, in all their different forms, affected



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their interests—for better or for worse—and then the UK as a modern, democratic free market economy with a reputation for standing up for the rule of law and human rights. If you like, that fundamental fact, for some Iraqis, is a positive; they want to engage with it, and they want more of that in Iraq. Other Iraqis would see that as not the way they want Iraq to go, or as against specific interests. What we know, after 20 years, is who our friends are and who are friends are not, in Iraq.

The majority of the people who are at the head of institutions in Iraq will, I think, give the UK some consideration in terms of partnering. Not everybody is going to be ideologically with us, and some will be under the influence of other countries. Those under the influence of Iran are going to be among the more difficult for us, I think, to partner with.

Q264 **Bob Seely:** On that point, you talked about ideology, but it is theology, really, isn't it? Do you think we have more of a positive relationship with senior Sunni representatives in that country, as opposed to the senior Shi'a, because of the influence of Iran, or is that way too simplistic?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Where we naturally have connections is not on the basis of Sunni, Shi'a or Kurd, but among those who would say, "My Iraqi identity is important, and if we don't, as Iraqis, have that in the mix, we are going to be fighting each other and destroying each other"—what you might call a more nationalist viewpoint, even if you are a Shi'a, a Sunni or a Kurd. I think that is important and I think that, naturally, we engage well with that. They tend to be the middle classes, they tend to be educated, they tend to have some stake in society and they very often are descended from the people who have been influential in Iraq in the past.

The bottom line on all of that is that, as we think forward after 20 years of experience of being very connected to Iraq, the more we focus on, if you like, national forces, or people who feel their Iraqi identity more than their regional or sectarian identity, the more we will partner and the better it will be for Iraq.

Q265 **Bob Seely:** I have a couple of other points on that. Historically, we had a role in forming the Iraqi state—after the Arab Legion, after the Arab rebellion—and a relationship with the previous kings of Iraq, who were then overthrown by the Ba'athists, etc. Is that seen to be a positive thing, in the sense that people look back and think there was an Iraq with greater stability prior to Saddam, prior to the Ba'athists, etc? Does that give us any credibility?

Just briefly, on the Iraqi diaspora—that is slightly new to me, so could you say a few words about that?

**Jonathan Wilks:** I have done three postings in Iraq since 2003, finishing up as ambassador, and I have always felt that this is potentially a big strength for the UK. The Iraqi diaspora is big, it is educated, and it is successful. Some—as happened with the US diaspora—went back in the early days and were not welcome, and were not able to operate, but others since then have gone back, and we have a lot of Iraqi-British businesses who know how to operate in the context of the relationship





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between the two countries. I think that is stronger for us than it probably is for any other country, certainly outside of the region.

The one thing I would say about credibility in history is that I think Iraqis who look at Britain today, and find something in it that they want to partner with or be a part of, will say that as long as Britain looks back on its last century of involvement in Iraq and is honest about the good and the bad, warts and all, then that Iraqi is likely to do the same when they look at their history and their role. On that basis of a sort of basic honesty about, "Right, here we are, we think there's a chance for partnership; the past is done, even if we have to recognise it," then we can work very effectively, including with people who, maybe ideologically, are not obviously our partners, but who see a need for pragmatism.

**Q266 Bob Seely:** Briefly, on the relationship between the Iraqi Shi'a and Iran—I hope I'm not treading on anyone else's territory with this question, Chair—how does that dynamic play out? We tend to see things as Iran being controlling and having its puppets around the Middle East—but we probably need a more nuanced perspective with some of the Shi'a representatives in Iraq. Is that fair?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Yes. As I finished my ambassadorship in 2019, the protest movement was starting, and it was led by Shi'a. There is one thing common to all Iraqis, which is that they tend to unite against foreign intervention if they see that as against their interests. It tends to bring them together, as you might expect. I think by then—and this is probably still the case—Iran was seen as the biggest intervener in Iraqi affairs. It was nothing to do with co-religion; the Shi'a were Iraqi first, or they had Iraqis' interests, and they didn't want foreigners to take advantage of them.

**Chair:** On that exact point, Henry.

**Q267 Henry Smith:** Following on from my colleague Mr Seely's point on external influence over the countries of the Levant—Mr Coningham, could you give us your perspective on some other countries? We've heard about Iran, but there is Russia—with its relationship with Syria—and China as well, and their involvement in places like Lebanon.

**Urban Coningham:** I'll start with Iran, because I think it's quite interesting that we often have these debates about what is a proxy and what is an ally, and I think in reality it makes very little difference. I don't think anyone would sit before you and say that Qatar and Hezbollah are the same as the Houthis. What unites this group is that without Iranian support, without Iranian financial weaponry and training support, they wouldn't be able to have the power they do, and that means we have to be a lot more honest about dealing with Iran.

It is the same thing with the JCPOA. From my perspective, that is dead in the dust and has been for some time, and we are basically on the verge of a nuclear Iran, so we need to become a lot more open about how we deal with that.



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In terms of Russia and China, I think the most useful thing I have seen on Russian involvement in Syria and how we deal with that is reports by Bellingcat, who are very good at identifying Russian actors within Syria and some of the war crimes and conflicts that they are involved in, and tracking that and publishing it so it is clear to the rest of the region. On China, finally, I think Iraq is probably the obvious candidate for where most Chinese involvement is—specifically, in infrastructure around Basra in the south. But as you say, it's also increasing in Lebanon. I think that is likely to continue.

The best designation of China in the region that I have heard is that they are not an alternative to the US, but they are an emerging competitor and countries will continue to use that sort of difference between the UK and Europe to seek more aid. We mentioned that all these countries are very economically weak. They rely on that foreign aid, so it is completely natural that they will turn to China for it at points.

**Will Todman:** If I could just add a little on China in Syria, I think China has been keen to increase its diplomatic role in the region, most notably with the Iran-Saudi rapprochement, but I think China is struggling a bit when it comes to Syria and is trying to play a longer game.

China invited Assad last September and announced a strategic partnership with Syria, and Syria has also been included in the belt and road initiative, but when you look at what has come from these agreements, it is very little so far. Chinese involvement in Syria tends to be focused on trying to encourage future private sector investment, particularly as it relates to manufacturing. It does not provide very much aid and the aid it does provide does not go through the UN like most international donors. It goes straight through the Syrian state. I think it is keen to signal that it is in Syria for a long time, but so far it has been quite frustrated that it has not really gained any economic benefits.

Q268 **Henry Smith:** A little bit further south than the immediate region, but nevertheless beyond aid and trade, China's military ambitions are being articulated in Djibouti with the base that they now have there. Are there growing signs of military involvement being projected elsewhere in the broader Middle East and North Africa region, particularly affecting countries like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon?

**Urban Coningham:** In general, it is not something that I have seen a lot of. I think it makes sense for China to focus on these economic and diplomatic efforts, as Will said. I have seen very little of that and I can't see much of that happening.

**Jonathan Wilks:** I would support what Urban says. China obviously buys a lot of hydrocarbons from the region and obviously it wants to develop trade and it has technological partnerships as well that are developing, but I do not see any evidence of it stepping in strategically and militarily to become a player, with all the risks involved. In political terms, China is tending not to side with anybody in the Middle East, but just to be an honest broker, willing to have relations with all of them.



Q269 **Henry Smith:** Again, slightly straying from the immediate area, would you say that that is also the case with regards to Yemen and the Houthi attacks on Red sea shipping?

**Jonathan Wilks:** In general, I would say the picture is of China having clearly more of a presence in the region economically—as you say, there are some naval elements of that—but not really muscling in to the region at all.

Q270 **Royston Smith:** Jon, is the UK doing enough to engage diplomatically in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon? Should there be more high-level visits? Do you think they are necessary?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Looking back over the mid-2010s, the Arab spring had not come to anything, and I think it is fair to say that Ministers here—I think this was true in the US and a lot of our European allies as well—just thought, “There is so much else we need to be doing in other parts of the world. This is not going anywhere. Our partners are not delivering anything that we could build on. We have got some real downsides—obviously ISIL, Daesh and al-Qaeda—that we have got to protect against and we have got to manage that situation.” I think there was a definite change and a definite deprioritisation around the middle of the 2010s for the whole region.

Now, of course, if a crisis came, that was managed, but I think there was much less optimism that a strategy could deliver long-term success. The question is, is that right? Have we learned any lessons from that? Given the strategic decision to focus on the Indo-Pacific tilt and the fact that we had a very positive focus in the region on trade and investment relationships with the Gulf and strategic relationships as well with Turkey and Israel—just managing this area in between, you can see why it happened. I do not think it was a huge error of analysis or prioritisation.

The one thing I would say, though, is that we know it is an earthquake zone. We know that the gap between Governments, elites and rulers and the people in that part of the world is large and can be exploited by extremist groups, who can grow back—we have not solved the problem yet. I think we have to keep a certain level of attention and expertise and work with the partners we have while being realistic about what we can achieve—or what we can achieve with like-minded.

Q271 **Royston Smith:** I agree with your analysis completely, and we have been talking about that. One of the reasons we are doing this inquiry is because of that to some degree. What about countries like Lebanon, where we perhaps could make quite a difference? Are we doing enough with a country like that? It is already in rag order, isn't it? It cannot get much worse, but it can get better. Is that something we should be doing?

**Jonathan Wilks:** That is right. We have had successful programmes of co-operation, including boosting the Lebanese armed forces and strengthening the border. We should certainly look again at whether we can sustain some level of partnership. I think policymakers have this instinct, even if they are coming to it afresh, but if the people on the



ground—the politicians, armed groups or main economic forces—are not going to basically patch things up, it is very difficult for us to achieve that.

You very often hear the comment that we cannot want things more than the locals want them themselves. You definitely keep a presence and keep exploring partnerships, and you watch on events, but right now, with Lebanon, we have to do what we can to stop it descending into total chaos, but that has to be led by the Lebanese themselves.

**Q272 Royston Smith:** I may go slightly off-piste here, Chair. Having just left Qatar, you will have been looking all over the region. If you look at Lebanon and the way it is governed, or the way they have attempted to govern themselves and how difficult that would be now to unravel in order to put in a different governance structure, is there a risk of Yemen going into a similar governance structure? The Houthis may well be part of whatever the future governance arrangements are, and then you would be nailing them on pretty much forever. Perhaps in decades to come, maybe sooner, you may see a similar situation in Yemen to what you are seeing now in Lebanon.

**Jonathan Wilks:** Yemen and Lebanon are incredibly different places in terms of the level of development and political history. What I would say about both countries and their political cultures is that, although you have ideological forces that are powerful and dominant in certain areas, like Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen, there is a great tradition of keeping things going, avoiding the worst-case scenarios, cutting deals and getting to some form of basic common interest.

Supporting what is left of those cultures is definitely in our interest, because things can always get worse. I think we have to accept that it is going to be fragile and that we are not going to be able to deliver solutions, nor will our like-minded allies, but that we must try our best to work with those who we think we can partner with on the ground.

**Q273 Royston Smith:** Finally, not to talk about Brexit all day—though some people may see it that way—we have new freedoms that we did not have before, through bilaterals and FTAs. Are there any opportunities within or across the Levant and elsewhere that we are not exploiting, but should be?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Looking at UK foreign policy post Brexit, it is quite clear that we have certain strong bilateral relationships in that region and other parts of the world. You might say that, whatever our global view—Indo-Pacific tilt, focusing on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, for obvious reasons, or Israel-Gaza, again for obvious reasons—we should take care to prioritise upwards certain strong bilateral relationships we have with certain countries in the region.

In the region we are talking about here, Jordan is the obvious one. We do have partners there, and we have a very effective way to deliver positive partnerships across the piece. After Brexit, I think the region very often looked at the UK taking a more active role outside of Europe, so there is an expectation that we would do that. Whether that expectation has been



met is questionable, because we have limited resources and we cannot be everywhere doing everything. But we definitely always need to bear in mind that we have certain legacy relationships that work and that we should not neglect.

Q274 **Royston Smith:** Does anyone want to add anything? Will?

**Will Todman:** It is also important to recognise the shifts in aid to these countries in the last few years since Brexit. Syria has had a cut of 70%, and Lebanon even more, so I think it is difficult for the UK to play a really big role.

However, there is an opportunity that has come from the FCO-DFID merger, and in Syria we are seeing some interesting examples of the UK taking a lead on understanding the politicisation of aid in Syria and the intrinsically political nature of restrictions on humanitarian access. The UK has led the creation of the Aid Fund for Northern Syria, which is intended to be a replacement if the UN's access to those areas is blocked. That is quite forward-looking, and few actors have been prepared to take a step like that. I would like to see even more of that.

I think there is an opportunity for the UK to be a bit more creative when it comes to understanding the politics of interventions in these really tricky circumstances. In Syria particularly, that could look like early recovery, which is less than reconstruction but more than humanitarian aid. At the moment, the UK is somewhat at the vanguard of launching these types of interventions, but it could be a bit less British about it. It could be a bit more confident in saying, "This works," and in trying to get other donors to learn the lessons that the UK has learned and play more of a role in defining what the next phase of intervention in Syria will look like.

Q275 **Fabian Hamilton:** Will, could I follow on directly from your last comments? Do you think that UK overseas development assistance to those countries is sufficient in amount, or should it be increased?

**Will Todman:** I think it is certainly not sufficient. My first comment was that the economic situation in Syria is the worst it has been for 13 years. The same can be said for Lebanon. The fact that the UK has cut ODA to these countries by 70% or 80% means that it is certainly not sufficient. Having said that, I understand that there are other UK priorities around the world. That is why I am proposing that, if spending more is not possible, the UK can try to play more of a role in co-ordinating other donors and how they act here.

The integrated review and refresh talked about engaging more with other actors, including the Gulf. So far we have not seen very much of that, but Gulf states have an interest in stability in Syria—Qatar is particularly interested in education—and there could be more effort to collaborate on some shared interests there. Ultimately, the UK would not be insulated from the consequences of a real collapse in Syria. Syrians are the third largest population on the boats crossing the channel, and we could expect a lot more of that if things get even worse in Syria.



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Q276 **Fabian Hamilton:** Jon, you are nodding there. Do you think that UK overseas development assistance is being spent effectively?

**Jonathan Wilks:** Perhaps I can come to that question after saying, as a follow-up to Will, that the idea of partnerships with Gulf countries on aid is important. That is developing—I was doing it in Qatar in my last job—but we are doing it with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates and some of the other Gulf states as well.

On aid, we have to be incredibly careful in these situations about bad governance, weak states and fewer and less effective partners. From the perspective I had of not working in those countries in the last five years, I am not a critic on that score. But there is another side to this: I am absolutely convinced, having spent 34 years in the Middle East, that the integration of aid policy with regional policy is vital and must lie at the heart of what the UK does. Therefore, if the Foreign Office and DFID had not been merged, I would have been advocating that being done in a way that allowed us to be effective with whatever resource we developed. We have to be very hard-headed, though, about the quality of the partner on the ground who is going to help us to turn aid into development.

Q277 **Fabian Hamilton:** Urban, you were nodding there as well. What changes do you think should be made, then, to our ODA spend? Should it be more, should it be less, should it be in different areas? What do you think?

**Urban Coningham:** The first thing we have to do is, as Jon says, be extremely pragmatic. Ultimately, the relationship with Jordan and keeping Jordan stable and secure is more important than what we can achieve in Syria and Lebanon with limited resources.

If I can go on to Jordan, we often take for granted the idea that it is the bastion in a Levant that is increasingly chaotic, but there is nearly 50% youth unemployment there and there are still 700,000 Syrian refugees. There are serious underlying problems in Jordan, both economically and with the current conflict in Gaza and the danger of that spilling over into the west bank, particularly around Al-Aqsa, in Ramadan. We need to be quite hard-headed; in an ideal world, we would be able to provide aid to all these countries, but we have to be quite selective about the effectiveness of where it is going.

Q278 **Chair:** Jon, is there any hope or horizon when it comes to Syria?

**Jonathan Wilks:** It is very difficult to see Syria recovering with the current regime in place. The nature of that regime makes a recovery uniquely difficult. The policy position we have had, which is to get to a political process, is the right one, but there is no sign at the moment that the regime is interested in that, because the regime is very focused on core interests and not necessarily on governing the whole of the territory of Syria.

Of the three countries we have focused on more than the others—Iraq, Syria and Lebanon—I think Syria is the most intractable. That does not





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mean that something cannot be done for the Syrian people, in certain areas in particular, but Lebanon and Iraq look more promising as countries where we should try to manage the downside risks.

**Q279 Chair:** Forgive me, but what happens in Syria impacts all the neighbouring countries. The political process did not work; no matter how hard efforts were made, the decision in 2015 fundamentally resulted in the current political stalemate. Then we had the Arab League trying a new opening of the doors to Assad, which many of us were very uncomfortable with, and that has also not resulted in any positive change. It seems, essentially, that we have all given up on Syria and we are all saying, "Well, Assad will remain in power, he will continue to treat his people appallingly, he'll die and one of his children will take over and we will see if they are just as bad or if they are slightly better." Is that unfair?

**Jonathan Wilks:** You are absolutely right that you cannot turn your back on Syria. For me, looking back on 34 years, it is the biggest piece of unfinished business from my time in the jobs that I did. I have a lot of Syrian friends—although, going back to a point I mentioned earlier, we now have quite a Syrian diaspora in this country. I don't think we should or can ignore the country and its people.

Stepping back a little bit, for every outside country that has a relationship, you have to look at the strength of your partner on the ground and the strength of your relationship with that partner. Russia found a partner on the ground in the Assad regime and strengthened that relationship, and they have helped to produce the result that we see today. I think we have to say that those countries that have helped to create a situation have to play a big part in resolving the resulting political, economic and humanitarian disaster. That is what people ask us to do in Iraq, quite rightly, and I think we need to be talking to those countries that have produced the result that we see on the ground, which are primarily Russia and Iran.

**Q280 Chair:** Finally, briefly on Jordan, His Majesty has plans to introduce a more democratic process or a kind of parliamentary democracy. Where do we see that going? How stable do we think Jordan is? I am not sure who wants to lead on that. Jon, do you want to take it?

**Jonathan Wilks:** I have not been ambassador to Jordan, but I have worked in Jordan a lot. I think political inclusion is an important part of ensuring a bright future for Jordan, but just as important, if not more so, is opening up economic opportunity, and getting the private sector working and job creation going. With that will come more demands for political participation, but that is what we have to support. Of course, that is true for many other countries in the region. Youth unemployment is incredibly high generally across the region. We have to use what political influence we have to encourage leaders to focus on liberating their private sectors and creating jobs.

**Chair:** We are going to have to leave it there, but can I say a big thank



you to all four of our guests? It is very much appreciated. With that, we will suspend briefly to change the panel.

## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Radwan Masmoudi, Dr Shana Cohen and Amine Ghoulidi.

Q281 **Chair:** Welcome back to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we now turn to North Africa. We have three fabulous guests joining us.

**Dr Cohen:** Hi. Thank you very much for having me. I am currently the director of a think-tank based in Ireland, which is focused on Ireland and the EU. I am also the managing editor of the *Journal of North African Studies*, so my knowledge comes in part from my job as the editor.

**Chair:** Thank you ever so much for flying over to join us.

**Dr Cohen:** That's fine.

**Dr Masmoudi:** Good afternoon. I am currently the president of the Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy, which is an organisation based in Washington DC. I am originally from Tunisia, but I have been living in Washington for the past 40 years or so.

**Amine Ghoulidi:** Good afternoon. I am Amine Ghoulidi, a visiting fellow with the Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation. I am also a doctoral student in defence studies at King's College London and a convenor of the MENA research group at King's.

Q282 **Chair:** Radwan, I will start with you. Can you kindly characterise for us the form of governance that we seem to see across North Africa?

**Dr Masmoudi:** Thank you very much for having me. I think the forms of governance that we see in North Africa are not that different from what we see in the entire Arab world. They are oppressive regimes and dictatorships that basically abuse the human rights constantly of anybody who opposes them. I think that is true of all the Arab world.

There are some nuances. Tunisia, for example, was a successful democracy for 10 years between 2011 and 2021 following the Arab spring. Tunisia was the only success story of the Arab spring, and it succeeded in adopting first a very liberal, progressive and democratic constitution back in 2014. It also succeeded in organising six free and fair elections in those 10 years. Unfortunately, Tunisia also succumbed to a coup in July 2021 and now has joined the ranks of the other Arab countries that are distinguishable by oppressive regimes that do not respect the rule of law and constantly abuse human rights.

Morocco has made some improvements in recent years in terms of democracy and human rights. I think currently, Morocco is probably the best one in the Arab world in terms of respect for human rights. I do not think that it is a democracy yet, but it has achieved some economic



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growth as well in the last 10 years and made some progress on the democratic front.

Algeria is of course ruled by the military, and it has been ruled by the military since its independence in 1963. There has been a strong movement for democracy in Algeria in recent years. Peaceful protests have been very widespread, especially in 2019 and 2020, so the regime is starting to change and allow for some opposition movements and parties. Algeria will have a presidential election in September. Hopefully both Tunisia and Algeria will have presidential elections in September, which will represent another milestone to restore or continue on the path to democracy.

Unfortunately, Libya has been divided. It has basically been in a civil war, even though things have improved in the last couple of years, but it still has two Governments and two Parliaments. I think Libya needs to be reunited and continue on the path to democracy.

Q283 **Chair:** Thank you. Amine, on Radwan's comment about how Tunisia was the only Arab spring success story, what do you feel were the conditions that allowed it to take that opportunity over that decade?

**Amine Ghouli:** Tunisia is a very interesting case, as Radwan Masmoudi mentioned. It is a bit of a tragedy of the North African experience with democracy. It is the birthplace of the Arab spring; it paved the way for a social movement across the region, and we were all hopeful that the democratisation path would move forward. I was in Tunisia immediately after the Arab spring, and the mood was one of optimism and celebration in the streets. The civil society was vibrant. The economy was a little bit challenged, but there was still tremendous hope for the path forward.

I went to Tunisia several years later and the mood had drastically changed. There was a tremendous lack of optimism across various segments of Tunisian society. The economic situation went from bad to worse, and some key economic sectors suffered drastically, including the tourism industry and the fertiliser sector, which had been the lifeline of the Tunisian economy for so long.

What happened in 2020, with Kais Saied's decision to suspend the constitution and basically dismantle some of the wins that had been achieved the decade before, has put Tunisia on a path of uncertainty, and I think it would be interesting for us to discuss these issues further.

Q284 **Fabian Hamilton:** Radwan, you mentioned Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Libya. Morocco has made some progress towards democracy but Tunisia seems to have gone backwards, and there are signs of hope in Algeria but not very many. I wonder what you think has held up the progress towards a western-style democracy—an open democracy—in each of those three very different countries, starting with Morocco.

**Dr Masmoudi:** First, democratisation is a process. It is a long process. It takes time. It cannot happen in one year or even in a few years. It takes decades. It is also normal that you have setbacks. It is not always a



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straight line; it does not always go forwards. Sometimes there are crises and there are problems.

I think that there are also domestic and regional forces that are openly anti-democratic—that are openly acting against democracy. They see democracy as a threat to their interests and their way of governing. Regional countries such as UAE, Saudi Arabia and in particular Egypt are against democracy. They see democracy—even in Tunisia, which is a small country relatively far away from them—as a threat to their stability.

There are a lot of forces. I think Russia, China and Iran also are against democracy and are actively lobbying or pushing against democracy, because again they see democracy, or western-style democracy, as a threat to them. There are a number of forces.

In Tunisia's case, for example, in those 10 years of the democratic transition, all the politicians and political forces and Governments focused on the political transition—changing the political system and building political institutions. They honestly forgot that they needed to pay attention to the economy, to the bread and butter issues that most Tunisians of course are deeply concerned about.

By 2020, when the covid pandemic hit, the Tunisian economy was already in trouble, but it got much worse in those two years. In 2020 and 2021, the economy suffered tremendously—there was a reduction of somewhere between 20 the West % and 25% in GDP in those couple of years.

I think, including the United States, the UK and the European Union, did provide some assistance to Tunisia in those 10 years. I do not think it was enough, especially on the economic front. I think that the West should, and could, have supported Tunisia's economy, economic progress and development much more to provide the political system with time. Again, the transition takes time and at the same time, you need to stabilise the economy in those years, so that the Tunisian people can be more patient and not demand immediate results, which are difficult.

Q285 **Fabian Hamilton:** Would that economic support have prevented the slide towards authoritarianism by President Kais Saied?

**Dr Masmoudi:** Yes, I think it could have. I think that the economy was a major factor in the coup. There was a malaise in Tunisia; the Tunisian people felt that their economic situation was much worse than before and they blamed the political parties, but also blamed the democratic process. They thought that the democratic process was too slow, and that the politicians were concerned only about politics but not the normal citizen.

Honestly, the major lesson of the failure of the Tunisian democratic process is that Tunisia and democratic transitions in general need much more economic support, similar to the Marshall plan. Remember that eastern Europe received billions and billions of dollars to stabilise the economy during the transition after they left the Soviet Union. That is what made the transition succeed.



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Q286 **Fabian Hamilton:** Can I come to you, Shana? Clearly there is a theme here: the economics of those four countries are hampering the full transition to democracy. How would you compare Morocco with Tunisia, Algeria or, of course, the chaos in Libya? Can you take us through all four countries and look at the politics of the economics?

**Dr Cohen:** I would slightly disagree with Radwan, although I am very supportive of the idea that democracy is the only way forward. The region has tried authoritarianism, and it hasn't worked.

Q287 **Fabian Hamilton:** But Tunisia is sliding back to authoritarianism.

**Dr Cohen:** It is, yes. I think there is an institutional problem. You can't just say that economic investment will solve the problems, because there has actually been quite a lot of investment in Morocco. I wouldn't necessarily agree with the assessment of Morocco. It is the most liberal, but that is not saying very much. It is ranked by the V-Dem democracy index as a closed autocracy. In fact, in recent years, the King has been increasingly absent, and in his place—I don't know whether you know this—the security forces have become not more powerful but more present. There has been a crackdown on civil society, and particularly the free press.

Across all four countries, you don't have an independent judiciary, well-functioning institutions and the rule of law that can provide guarantees to businesses—especially small and medium-sized businesses, which are big employers. The most significant issue in the region, besides climate change—we had two natural disasters within the space of a couple of weeks last year—is unemployment. It is 40% in Tunisia for people aged between 15 and 24. How do you tackle an unemployment rate like that? In Morocco, at least half of people who are employed don't have a degree and don't have a formal contract.

We cannot just say, "Okay, we are going to put a lot of money in North Africa, and that will work." Across all four countries, you need functioning institutions. In Libya, there was not clear management of the dam near Derna, and that is what caused the damage. I don't think you can separate out investment and well-functioning institutions.

On the political parties themselves, there is a lot of overture from the US about how to train politicians and build stable political parties. I think in Tunisia—I could be wrong—there was a rush, but there wasn't the depth of experience. The same thing happened in Egypt: there wasn't the depth of experience of engaging in the process of policymaking. It is the same thing in Morocco. Ultimately, everything comes back to the palace, so you don't have the skills. To get close to the economy, you have to be linked to the economic elite. That is why the institutions that support small and medium-sized enterprises are really important. That would be my overview of the situation.

Q288 **Fabian Hamilton:** Given their proximity to Europe, don't you think Europe has more of a responsibility to take on that institution-building role?



**Dr Cohen:** Absolutely.

Q289 **Fabian Hamilton:** And the training of politicians and those who wish to take office?

**Dr Cohen:** Absolutely.

**Chair:** I know you want to go on to Western Sahara.

Q290 **Fabian Hamilton:** Yes. How big of an issue is Western Sahara? I know it is a very big foreign policy issue for the Moroccan Government. I know the Algerians are supporting Polisario, based in Tindouf. There is a stalemate at the moment, so where do we go from here? How does this get resolved? You still have MINURSO there in Laayoune trying to keep the two groups apart. Is this the major issue that the Moroccans believe it to be? Is Algeria wrong in supporting Polisario? How does the UN, and Morocco and Algeria—who aren't talking to each other at the moment—resolve the whole situation?

**Dr Cohen:** The problem with Western Sahara is that it supports the political agenda of the palace, so unless it goes their way it will be very hard to negotiate, especially with the current King. Eventually, the solution will be autonomy with some sort of political independence for Western Sahara.

Q291 **Fabian Hamilton:** Forgive me, Shana, but is that not what the King and the Government of Morocco are advocating—an autonomy plan?

**Dr Cohen:** They are, but with Morocco leading the way. There is no communication between Algeria and Morocco over the issue in a substantial way that would lead to a joint resolution. The friction after the earthquake near Marrakech was partly based on the Government in Morocco's perception of who was supporting claims to Western Sahara and who was not. That is one reason for it.

The Government allowed the UK in after the earthquake but not France. Part of that is the friction in the relations between France, Algeria and Morocco. With Western Sahara, yes, I think it will have to be international institutions. Hopefully I am wrong, but I just cannot see a resolution in the near term, because I do not think anybody is invested in it except for the people living there.

Q292 **Chair:** From your perspective, how is the Western Sahara debate seen in the US Congress and Senate at the moment? The Heritage Foundation is working on President Trump's manifesto. What are his priorities likely to be in this region should he be re-elected? Where does Western Sahara fit in the US discussion around North Africa?

**Amine Ghoulidi:** I would like to go back to the place Western Sahara occupies in the Moroccan imagination. It is very clear: Western Sahara for the Moroccans is the lens through which they see their foreign relations. It is the most important issue on their foreign policy agenda. It is the issue that defines their relationship with their neighbours and Europe, and it is the issue that drives their relationship with the United States and beyond.





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It is a critical issue, and I am glad it is being addressed today because it is also a fundamental issue on the bilateral front between Morocco and Algeria.

Although we are talking about a stalemate, it is not really a stalemate. Polisario walked away in 2020 from the ceasefire agreement and started targeting Moroccan military outposts in Western Sahara. It is a form of warfare that needs to be addressed. There have not been any serious attempts at bringing the parties back to the negotiation table to reinstate the ceasefire under the auspices of MINURSO and the United Nations or what have you.

In terms of a long-term resolution to the conflict, the Moroccans have put forward an autonomy plan with the strong support of the United States and France, and there have been many rounds of negotiations to try to find the modalities to convince the parties of the conflict to agree on a final format of this autonomy plan.

Unfortunately, we have a very serious issue when it comes to this, which is that a fundamental party to the conflict refuses to be acknowledged as a direct party: Algeria. You cannot move forward in an international system without the nation state that remains the most important unit of analysis. You cannot move toward resolving the conflict when an insurgent group is residing on Algerian territory, but Algeria will not accept to be part of a direct negotiation with Morocco on the specific issue.

Going back to the US approach to this very specific issue, under the former Administration, there was a tripartite agreement between Morocco, the Trump Administration and Israel, by which Morocco normalised relationships with Israel and the US recognised Moroccan sovereignty over this issue. This position has not fundamentally changed under the current Administration.

I personally anticipate that there will not be any fundamental changes should a political transition come in November. Especially on the US-Morocco bilateral front, the relationship is institutionalised, and there are strong security relations between the two countries. What might change is how the US tolerates and is willing to engage with spoilers in the region when it comes to its fundamental national interests in the region. In this case, we know that there are a number of actors that have been present and active in North Africa, and the US would like to limit their footprint.

**Q293 Brendan O'Hara:** Shana, you mentioned earlier environmental factors and the impact that they would have. How serious, for example, would the threat of desertification be? What would be the consequence if that were to happen? Is there anything that the UK could do to help to address that?

**Dr Cohen:** Certainly drought. Morocco is in its sixth year of drought, and that will have an economic impact. The second would be the lack of preparation for natural disasters. For the area near Marrakesh where the earthquake was, one of the issues was that there was not good



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infrastructure to actually get to the site, plus the homes were older and built in a traditional style, so they were destroyed quite easily. The population itself has high levels of deprivation and low levels of education, so you are in a situation or area that is very vulnerable to a natural disaster and just is not prepared for it.

There are two sides to it. Desertification is a big issue in a country such as Morocco that relies heavily on its agricultural economy. There is an existential question about how much more it can continue to grow oranges, because it requires so much water. Maybe the agricultural economy will have to shift. I think they are building desalination plants. There is then a ban on using hammams—I think it is three times a week that they have to be closed—because of the use of water. There is desertification from the south, but in general drought is a significant issue across the region.

**Q294 Brendan O'Hara:** Following on from that—this is probably for Amine—how will the drivers of migration from not just North Africa itself, but those transiting through from Sub-Saharan Africa, impact the UK? What would it take, if possible, to stop or even reverse those drivers that we currently see?

**Amine Ghoulidi:** That is a very important question that we see playing out all across North Africa—from Libya all the way to Morocco and Mauritania. There is instability in the wider Sahel. There have been five coups over the last several months, which generated tremendous political instability coming on the heels of tremendous economic and social deprivation for those communities. That creates incentives for a large portion of these populations to travel north. We see these migrations putting a lot of pressure on countries such as Tunisia. We have seen this unprecedented articulation of some form of xenophobia in Tunisia that is quite striking over the last few months.

We see it in Morocco, although this should probably help to answer your second question. There is the fact that we have seen a constructive, positive relationship between the Moroccans and the Spanish that helped to address the issue of Morocco being a transit point for migration. We have seen those flows travel a little bit east to Tunisia and Libya.

The Moroccans and the Spanish continue to work on this issue. It remains a little bit of a problem for the Canary Islands, especially for migrant groups going through Mauritania into the Western Sahara area. Their making their way to the Canary Islands is becoming a serious issue for the Canary Islands. But overall, the quality of the bilateral relationship between the Moroccans and the Spanish helped to address some of the structural issues. That is reflected in the relatively low numbers of crossings that we have been seeing over the last year or two.

**Q295 Brendan O'Hara:** Is there anything that the UK could and should be doing to stop those drivers? I understand that there is a relationship between Morocco and Spain, but it means that people go elsewhere, so how do you stop the drivers that cause people to leave in the first place—



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or are we just caught up in the mindset that we can affect these things in the short to medium term when in fact we may not be able to?

**Amine Ghoulidi:** The UK has a natural extension into the Mediterranean through Gibraltar. The UK experience with those migratory flows is quite immediate, so it is an important question to ask. The UK, if the Spanish model is one to be followed, needs to invest in stronger bilateral ties with North African countries, which tend to be the main crossing points for these migration flows. It needs stronger ties and stronger security co-operation with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and even Mauritania. We are not discussing Mauritania today, but it is a country that is central to these conversations; probably, we need to find ways to bring Mauritania into the fold, as part of a regionwide initiative to address the root causes of migration.

**Dr Cohen:** I would add that the migration is not just from Sub-Saharan Africa; there is actually quite a lot of migration from North Africa itself—particularly Tunisia but also Morocco. There is a significant brain drain from North Africa, particularly to Europe. You would have doctors, nurses and high-tech engineers leaving Morocco and Tunisia for opportunity, but I also think Tunisia is a driver.

From what I have understood just from the Moroccan case, the issue isn't just economic opportunity; it is also the political environment. Going back to the fact that authoritarianism hasn't necessarily worked so it is a good time to try democracy, I think that the lack of freedoms has something to do with wanting to leave, because it affects the quality of life that you have. I think climate will be a big driver for Sub-Saharan Africa and I don't quite know what to do about that, to be honest.

**Dr Masmoudi:** I agree completely with what Shana just said. The main driver for immigration, both legal and illegal, is loss of hope. People are losing hope. A new phenomenon now in Tunisia is thousands and thousands of engineers, doctors, lawyers—these people are relatively well-to-do in Tunisia, but they are leaving by the hundreds and the thousands every month because they are losing hope.

Yes, of course, there is a lack of institutions in all these countries, but only democracy can solve these problems. Only democracy can provide a sense of dignity, belonging and freedom—the sense that you are free, that you are an owner in your country; you are not a stranger, somebody who can be locked up at any moment for any reason. So there are really two issues: political development and economic development are tied together very, very strongly. The failure of these regimes, for the past 60 years, to develop their countries and to provide real hope is because they are dictatorships. The citizens do not feel that they have rights in their countries and that their future is bright.

If we want to stop immigration, both legal and illegal, or at least reduce it significantly, that is about democracy, freedom, human rights and the ability to participate in your country and to decide the future of your country. That also will have an impact on the economy, because then



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investment will flow, the economy will grow, people will invest and people will stay in their country. Really the issue is democracy, in my opinion.

Again, it is a long-term process. It is not a quick fix. That is why we need to stay with it. We need long-term strategies for developing this region and these countries, and it has to start with democracy. It has to start with representative Governments that are accountable to their people, that have to deliver results to their people. That gives the people a sense of belonging and a desire to stay in their own countries, because they see hope and they see a brighter future for themselves and for their children.

**Q296 Royston Smith:** Can I just ask all of you, but perhaps Shana first, about Libya? I talk about this endlessly and it is the same as with Yemen, really, in that the UK is the penholder of Yemen, but I see probably more engagement from the US envoy or the UN envoy when it comes to the peace process between the Houthis and Saudi, and then from the north and the south. It is the same with Libya. I always feel that we have a bigger responsibility than other people because we intervened in 2011—with good intentions. We had the Foreign Secretary with us a few weeks ago. If he got passionate about anything in that meeting, it was the fact that he was being challenged on, “Was that a good idea, or was it not?” I think we have a bit more of a responsibility than, perhaps, others because of our very recent past there.

We have been told earlier, in other meetings, that there are too many people there who are self-interested and have what they want, essentially. Why would they want to give it up? Haftar—why would he want to give it up? The Government of National Unity is the Government of National Unity in Tripoli and a bit elsewhere, but not national. You have got all these players there, and then you have got everyone else looking on, who perhaps should or should not have a responsibility. Is the West—and by that I mean the UK particularly because that is what we are looking at, but also the West in general—doing enough? Or has the West just turned its back on Libya and is just allowing it to crack on on its own, in its failed-state capacity?

**Dr Cohen:** I think the problem with Libya, if you don't do anything, is like the flood, which is an indicator of the future. I don't think you can ignore it, because you will have a crisis—whether it is a humanitarian crisis caused by natural disaster, or another kind of crisis. I think a way in is through local efforts after the flood. It is just like in Sudan, where people don't have any confidence in the Government. A theme throughout the region is distrust of the Government. In Morocco, it is not the one saving grace, but there is a pretty robust history of civil society. Even if the state has not been supportive at some points, the King has actually invested, at least at some level, in local civil society. It is the same thing in Libya, or in Sudan, which I know you are not talking about: you have local efforts to organise humanitarian relief. I think that is a way in, because there is such distrust of both Governments, which I don't think you can ignore, because I don't think a situation like that will just continue; I think there will be another crisis.

**Royston Smith:** At which point we will probably feel compelled—it depends where we are in any cycle, doesn't it? The bandwidth of any Government to do anything for very long is relatively limited. If they cannot fix something overnight, they tend to move on to the next crisis. But there will be another crisis is what you are saying, I think.

**Dr Cohen:** I cannot imagine not.

Q297 **Royston Smith:** Dr Masmoudi, do you want to add anything to that?

**Dr Masmoudi:** I think the West could have done more to support Libya. Haftar did not come out of nowhere. He was supported by the UAE, he was supported by Egypt, both militarily and financially. There is some possibility that he was also supported by Russia and the Wagner militias. The West stood by and did not stop it. The West could have put more pressure on Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia—all three of them are allies of the West—to stop intervening in Libya, and to stop arming Haftar, war in Libya, attacks on Tripoli and so many things. The West also could have done more in terms of building the democratic institutions. Again, it takes time and that is the problem: we want quick fixes, but there is no quick fix. We have to have long-term strategies, but Libya could be ready for a more stable Government and a more democratic Government—that is what the people of Libya want—if we stop foreign intervention from all these countries who basically want to create civil war, havoc and anarchy, and if we support the Libyans in building their own democracy. We have to stick with it. We have to invest in Libya, because that is how we build stability. The entire region could become really prosperous and could become an ally of the UK, the US and the European Union instead of being a mess, in chaos and a source of instability for the entire region.

Q298 **Royston Smith:** The former ambassador, who we saw recently, and the current ambassador talk about business booming and companies investing in Libya. Are they being overly optimistic, or is there something in the idea that the investment into the country will help to turn it around?

**Dr Masmoudi:** In the last couple of years there has been more stability, and more economic investment and prosperity. If there is a real national dialogue to bring both sides together and unite and have real free and fair elections for the entire country, I think Libya could become—first of all, it is of course full of resources; it is not a poor country. It can develop economically very quickly if we can solve the political conflict and crisis. I think it is very doable. I don't think it is very hard, but we have to stop arming Haftar and the other groups that are creating chaos.

Q299 **Fabian Hamilton:** One of our former ambassadors to Libya, Peter Millett, told us that British institutions, British investments and the British generally are very much trusted in Libya. Is that true? Are we trusted more than any other foreign power? He also said that there was quite an appetite for the Brits to get more involved. Would that be a disaster, Shana?



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**Dr Cohen:** I wouldn't be able to speak specifically to Libya. My experience in the other countries in North Africa is that, because the British aren't the French, and because they have a tradition—they are not a colonial power. They don't have the military baggage like the US. They are respected. I told Kim this: the British Council in Morocco is highly respected. I would think it would be the same in Tunisia. It wouldn't surprise me that they are respected in Libya because they are not the colonial power. There is not a long history of exploitation or power relations.

Q300 **Fabian Hamilton:** We were a colonial power, but not in North Africa.

**Dr Cohen:** No, not in North Africa, which excuses you to an extent.

**Fabian Hamilton:** Exactly. Amine.

**Amine Ghoulidi:** I would add that there is a very strong and vibrant Libyan community in the UK. Young and highly educated, they have been playing an important role in creating inter-linkages between the UK and Libya. That is to the credit of the United Kingdom in the ways that it is able to integrate members of the diaspora from North Africa.

Q301 **Fabian Hamilton:** Radwan, do you have anything to add on Libya and British influence?

**Dr Masmoudi:** Again, the British can play a very important role in the entire region. I was in Tunisia for most of the last 10 years, and the UK embassy in Tunis played an important role in facilitating the dialogue on the constitution, for example, and on the elections. I think, because of that, Tunisians and Libyans look favourably to the UK. We hope that the UK will help Tunisia and Libya, and of course Morocco and Algeria also, in solving these problems. We need help, assistance, support and engagement to build our democratic future.

Q302 **Chair:** I have two final questions. Dr Cohen, I would be interested in an assessment of where you think the direction of travel is for women's rights across the region.

**Dr Cohen:** That is a good question. I think it is mixed. It is going in the right direction, in fits and starts; that is how I would characterise it. It goes back to the British influence. There is a sense, whether you think it is accurate or not, that the British engagement represents the rule of law, which is often absent; well-functioning institutions; and people following the rules. That has to do with the business climate, but also how you lead your life.

For women in Morocco, the King has tried to make progress on the Moudawana, which is the family law, to restrict polygamy, as well as progress on divorce laws and the patriarchal control over children. For example, at the moment the father has to sign off on the child leaving the country or getting documentation. Tunisia is by far the most advanced. In Morocco, women tend to be the larger population in terms of illiteracy, unemployment and lack of formal degrees. I keep going back to the earthquake as an example, but even if you ask about desertification, it would be women who are suffering more, because men would migrate.





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The divorce laws are still punitive, even though you cannot unilaterally divorce somebody any more. In general, in places like Libya and Algeria—but only to an extent, because of Algeria's battle with Islamists—it is going in the right direction. But it is not going to be a linear process.

Q303 **Chair:** So potentially that is a brighter spot in our discussions.

**Dr Cohen:** I think it is totally out of desperation. Going back to Morocco or Tunisia, you need a dual income to survive. It is very hard economically to keep your wife at home.

Q304 **Chair:** Finally, you touched earlier on outside powers, and how the US would be keen to limit, contain or minimise the impact those powers have in North Africa. Are you talking about Gulf states, Arab states, China, Turkey or Russia? It would be very helpful to have an overview of where you see the most pernicious impact in the region. Most importantly, what is the effect those actors are trying to achieve and why?

**Amine Ghoulidi:** There are a number of actors, at least from a US standpoint, that are engaging in nefarious activities in North Africa. In this case I would list Russia, Iran and China. Starting with Russia, we have seen its involvement in the Libyan civil war through its proxies and the impact that has had on the political process in the country. Libya basically became a regional hub for Russian proxies that have tremendous influence in the wider Sahel region, such as in Mali and Niger and what-have-you. It is an issue that at some point we will have to grapple with in the mid-term.

When it comes to Iran, the idea that Iran is operating through proxies throughout the region is something that has been in public discourse in the last few months since the Houthis started their attacks against the cargo ships in the Red sea. We know that Iran is present in the Sahel region through its proxies—unfortunately, through the Lebanese community and Hezbollah. The US Treasury has designated many Lebanese individuals for their ties to Hezbollah in the wider Sahel region. There have been speculations and allegations that Iran has a touch point at the very least with the Polisario Front in Tindouf, both in Algeria and outside Algeria, which is an issue of concern that we might have to grapple with in the near future.

A fundamental pillar of any forthcoming Administration this November would be to address the looming challenge that China poses to US national security interests and foreign policy objectives. I know that this Administration designates China as a competitor with the intent and the means to shape the international structure. In North Africa, at least in both Morocco and Algeria, we have seen some increased engagement by various Chinese interests. The chief of staff of the Algerian army was in Shanghai and Beijing last year where he signed major deals—not only acquisition deals but deals for a jointly developed Algerian defence industry. That will have long-term implications for European security and US national security interests.



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We know that the Chinese are interested in investing in the critical mineral resources of North Africa and embedding themselves within the global supply chains, which will have long-term implications for US national security. Ultimately, those are the three main actors that Europe has to grapple with and the United States will have to engage with in North Africa.

**Chair:** That is really helpful. I thank all three of you. Our time is sadly up, but I am very grateful for the time you have taken. It has been really informative.