

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Political Islam](#), HC 118

Wednesday 14 September 2016

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Mr John Baron; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Mr Mark Hendrick; Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 154-202

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Tobias Ellwood and Neil Crompton.

Q154 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This is the final public evidence-taking session of our inquiry into political Islam. Minister, I am obviously delighted to welcome you and Mr Neil Crompton. You will be aware that we have invited Sir John Jenkins to come and give us evidence. We have found ourselves stuck in what might be described as a Catch-22 situation, where Sir John, who is the author of the Muslim Brotherhood review for the former Prime Minister, and is plainly an international expert on the subject into which we are inquiring, then declined to come unless he was in the company of a serving Minister, and then you wanted to come only if you were supported by a serving official. The result of all of that is we are not going to get the first-hand evidence of Sir John, which is a pity. There we are. You are here with Mr Crompton who, as I know from past experience, is an official of immense ability. Indeed, you are very firmly winning your spurs as Minister for the Middle East. We will do our best and let's hope that enables us to give a full and candid report afterwards.

Let me begin by commenting that your written evidence told us that British diplomatic missions report regularly on trends in political Islam. It also mentioned the role of the researcher analysts. Who converts all this information into a policy?

Mr Ellwood: First, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak about this important subject. I was advised that I would be able to give an opening statement. Are we moving straight in to your questions?

Q155 **Chair:** We have got evidence from you. Given everything else that has been going on today, it had slipped my mind that I was going to allow



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you a maximum 1,000-word opening statement. After 10 minutes, if it is still going, I will invite you to stop.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you. This is a welcome study that you are doing. This is a very important matter for this Committee to look at for the benefit of Parliament while also holding the Executive to account.

I will begin by stepping back and placing political Islam in context, looking at the growth of Islam from the beginning, following the Prophet Mohammed's death, the creation of a series of caliphates and eventually the occupation of a vast geographical space from the Atlantic all the way to the Pacific through various Muslim dynasties.

We can see that there was not uniformity. There were various understandings and different types of teachings that we can now see as such a different spectrum of interpretation of both the Koran and Hadith today. On top of that, where the religion moved into a community space, there were also deep attachments to previous cultures, beliefs and customs, which again are recognised in today's context.

As the Committee is well aware, there are certain timeline schisms that took place in the development of Islam. The biggest and most obvious is that between the Sunni and Shi'ite development. That is the best known, but others have developed, including Sufism and Salafism on the one side with the Sunni. Today, the Twelvers' approach to Shi'a Islam is seen in Iran, but then you go down to Yemen and you see the Fiver approach to Shi'a Islam.

It shows a different set of contexts and varying sets of values and also interpretations. That has an impact on how the movement from those days, when there was no sense of state or centralised governance, is interpreted into a modern context. It is important to reflect on the diversity of the religion itself and the various types of interpretations of a way of life and a religion.

On top of that, this vast expanse of the Islamic area was then interrupted in its development by two world wars, which imposed outside structures and so forth. That prompted perhaps a challenge, but certainly a question, as to how the role of Islam would be accepted or progressed in those areas.

It is worth saying that, although there are many centres of thought, one is Egypt, with its large population. It is often said, "Where Egypt goes, other Islamic nations follow." Huge thought was given in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to how to honour the objectives of the religion of Islam in a very modern context. The growth of the Muslim Brotherhood is part of that. That came in 1928, but there are many other thinkers as well. We are trying to manage this challenge of meeting the advancement of democratic values and other societal developments coming from outside, in the context of honouring the religious values and codes that are already in place.



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I just want to put that into the context of the study we are doing now. I think “political Islam” is a catch-all phrase. I am not sure that it is actually used in the Middle East or North Africa; I think it is something that we have created as a useful label, if you like, to encompass political parties, groups and organisations that, as I say, have very different contexts and backdrops. In Morocco, for example, the current Prime Minister represents one of the largest Islamic parties, the Justice and Development party, but in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates certain Islamic groups are proscribed. In Egypt, which I touched on, the Muslim Brotherhood is now banned—I am sure we will touch on that further, perhaps in questions—and yet it allows the Salafist Nour party to continue to operate.

Since the Arab spring, which of course is a massive line in the sand in the development of the Islamic world, there have been mixed fortunes for Islamic parties. I will just digress here to say that when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight, it was not for religious purposes. It triggered a popular uprising, which called for better accountability, removal of corrupt practices and so forth. But, in the space that we are talking about, where many political parties were banned under dictatorships, the best organised were often those religious groupings that then took advantage of the absence of government space.

As I say, that had mixed results across the piece. In Egypt, both the presidential and the parliamentary elections were won by the Muslim Brotherhood, but within months, millions of people were on the streets saying that that was not the direction of travel they wanted the country to go in. In Syria and Iraq, I think we can now say that the rise of Daesh—the space for Daesh to be created—was because certain Islamic thought was actually prevented. The Sunnis were not given the space in which to be recognised and they therefore moved to an extremist part of the spectrum in order to rise up, because they felt that Baghdad, in the case of Iraq, was not listening to them. So in some cases there has been movement in a positive way, and in others it has been very negative indeed. As I say, some Islamists have been locked out of the political process or subject to repression and that has caused a risk of previously peaceful individuals resorting to violence for political ends.

I make the point that some Islamist political groups may be committed to non-violence, but many still have socially conservative agendas. Even if they are non-violent in that sense, we still find that there is much work to do in encouraging improvements on human rights issues, women’s rights and the rights of minorities. We should also recognise that in recent months and years, both at a grassroots level and, indeed, on a state level, there has been a growth in sectarianism, which has also compounded the challenges we face today.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s engagement with political Islam is part and parcel of its engagement with the countries in the region—that point touches on the first question that I think you are about to open on. Our aim is to support our primary objectives of protecting our security, promoting our prosperity and protecting our values through an



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understanding of what actually happens in each country, as well as across the wider piece of the region as a whole.

I should say that in many cases, across the Middle East and North Africa, we have a unique and historical relationship with these countries. We are trusted; we are seen as more transparent and committed to understanding what is happening there and working with them. That is something that we need to leverage, not just for the prosperity agenda but for human rights, rule of law and governance.

As I implied earlier, the interpretation of Islam differs. It covers a wide spectrum, so when we speak of political Islam, we should also recognise that there are two distinct movements, Sunni and Shi'a, with sub-movements underneath that. On the Shi'a side, we should also remember that we have the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is the most prominent. Its external security organisation and, indeed, its military wing are proscribed by the United Kingdom. On the other side, we are in contact with active Shi'a parties, such as the governing party in Iraq, we speak to opposition voices in Bahrain, and of course we are embarking on new diplomatic relations with Iran.

In conclusion, I would say that political Islam will remain a factor in politics in many of the countries across the region. We are right to be both interested and engaged, but in some cases we should be sceptical about our depth of engagement.

Q156 Chair: Thank you, Minister. Isn't the definition of political Islam you've chosen to use so broad as to make it impossible to have a coherent policy on political Islam? Don't you need a rather narrower definition? Having al-Qaeda and so-called Islamic State included within your definition makes it rather difficult to deal with those Islamists who are operating within the rules of normal, democratic politics.

Mr Ellwood: I don't agree with the approach, though, if you are talking about a cover-all strategy. I don't think we can analyse it in that way. There is not a one-size-fits-all policy, which I think you want to tease out of me; we don't have that approach. Maybe Neil would like to add something on that. Our approach is usually done on a more geographical basis. I have just spent a few minutes showing the diversity of the interpretation of Islam itself and the consequential political impact it is having. It is not uniform right across the region, and therefore neither should our approach in each of the individual countries be.

Q157 Mr Hendrick: Talking about a geographical approach or whatever doesn't get away from the point that the Chairman was making, which is that a definition is not a catch-all; it is meant to be specific. The way you've described political Islam is so broad that it embraces everything from al-Qaeda and Islamic State through to fairly moderate versions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Clearly there needs to be a distinction between them. How would you make that distinction, and what sort of definition would you use as a better alternative to political Islam?



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Mr Ellwood: I feel that you yourself want to have a nice definition that then leads to a strategy.

Mr Hendrick: I just want to know what you're talking about.

Mr Ellwood: I don't agree with that approach. As I say, depending on where we are working, what we are doing in those countries and what is happening in those countries, it will vary from piece to piece. We can't step back and say, "Let's have the same strategy in our approach to Hamas, al-Qaeda and"—

Q158 **Mr Hendrick:** I am talking about a definition, not a strategy.

Mr Ellwood: Okay, but one leads on from the other. All I am saying is that the definition of political Islam will be broad. It covers such a variety that you can't be locked down. Different approaches are being taken under the broad banner of political Islam, and it would be wrong to get ourselves locked in and to say that we have the same approach in dealing with al-Qaeda, political Islam in Libya and political Islam in any other country in the region.

Mike Gapes: Can I press you on that? Nobody is suggesting you should have the same approach, but it seems a bit odd that you seem to focus on a geographical approach when in fact we are talking about ideology. The recent Shiraz Maher book on jihadist Islamism was published about a week ago—he gave evidence to our Committee—and he shows very clearly that there is within Islamism a grouping who are committed to a violent, terrorist, global caliphate. If they are committed to a global caliphate, even if they are operating in only certain parts of the world, it seems a bit strange that you would take a geographical approach, rather than an ideological approach.

Q159 **Chair:** Just to follow up that point, Mr Gapes, equally, are there not distinctive Islamist parties that are democratic, non-violent, flexible in their beliefs and in the process of trying to adjust to the kind of universal human rights conventions that the rest of us recognise? Examples might be the PJD, which you referred to in your opening remarks, Ennahdha in Tunisia, and you could make a case for the FJP in Egypt. Equally, where people committed to the violent imposition of a caliphate are embraced by the same definition of political Islam as those parties, both the geographic issue, which Mr Gapes has challenged, and the ideology equals this: should there always be a definitive approach to what one might call the acceptable end of the political Islamist spectrum in your definition?

Mr Ellwood: I mean no offence to the Committee when I say this, but I feel you are applying western values and trying to bracket organisations and movements across the Muslim spectrum to make it simple for us to have a simple strategy or approach.

Mike Gapes: I—

Mr Ellwood: If I can finish my point, Sir, you were citing examples showing some uniformity in the approach—



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Q160 **Mike Gapes:** I did not say it was uniform; I said there is a common ideology.

Mr Ellwood: Okay, even a common ideology, but I can give you illustrations from, as I just said, how we approach Morocco and Tunisia, where there are Islamic groups that are active and working there, and where we have a relationship. In fact, what we have seen in Tunisia in their engaging, and indeed, stepping back from perhaps considering violence, was that they have learned their lesson from looking over their shoulder at what happened in Egypt. We are seeing a transformation taking place in that country which is very welcome indeed, contrary to what we are seeing in Gaza, Syria or Iraq. We have to approach and understand each case on its own merits, and that is how the Foreign Office operates.

Q161 **Mr Baron:** Minister, I think I am in broad agreement with what you say. I think we have to tread carefully and gently over this terrain. If we look at the broad sweep of history, in the West we still have not perhaps arrived at the perfect example of democracy, and it has taken a couple of hundred years to get there. We have to be careful when treading on this terrain. Is it not just wiser to say—please correct me if I am wrong, in your view—that it is very difficult to give the one definition of political Islam? You have different systems at different stages. We have had good and bad examples. You have to tailor-make your policies according to the country in question, while embracing—how can I put it?—an encouraging approach, because you cannot get from the start to perfection in one bound.

Mr Ellwood: I am very grateful for your words. That is exactly our approach. We are constantly reminded, perhaps, of the longevity of our own development. Much as we promote our own set of values as an exemplar in the democratic space, it has taken us some time to get there. An awful lot of pain was endured in the process, yet we are now expecting many of these modern states that are very new—Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932, for example—to expedite to a democratic space. We must encourage that to happen, but the backdrop, as you say—I think this is something that you have been pressing in previous Committee hearings—is that the Foreign Office must engage and fully understand. We must have the necessary experts who can recognise what is actually happening in each area so as to better inform and influence foreign policy.

Q162 **Chair:** But don't these movements deserve some understanding of what our standards are, and of what we are seeking to achieve? At what point do they jump the bar of being respectable on universal standards of human rights, for example, or their commitment to democracy? Here are these immature political movements that have crawled out from under a stone of opposition—appalling opposition, in many cases, where they have been on the receiving end of some absolutely dreadful treatment by dictatorships—and we are in the process of shaping them. If we cannot apply overtly a set of standards that makes them acceptable in our eyes, are we not doing them and everyone else a profound disservice by not assisting their growth, as maturing political movements, in a direction



that is acceptable to the world?

Mr Ellwood: I think I would be in agreement with the spirit of what you say, but it is worth putting into context the work we are doing, overtly and more behind the scenes, in encouraging advancement when we are working with state interactors that are perhaps continuing to adhere to, or honour, some of the actions and forms that you speak of. We have to work and show our influence, and we do that by engaging, on a more geographical basis, in understanding what is happening. In cases where we believe that the bar has been crossed, those organisations are proscribed, and we do not have engagement with them.

Q163 **Mr Hendrick:** Talking about political Islamists, let's look at cases where they are in power. How would you say, from the examples that you know about, they have behaved in upholding democracy? I will give you an example. We have elections in Europe and, because we are liberal democracies, the parties that win elections tend to carry out their programme while being cognisant of the views of minority oppositions, different religious groups and civil society. They are quite tolerant of other points of view, and often take them into consideration. However, if we look at countries—I know we will come on to Egypt later—such as Turkey, there is a bit of a winner-takes-all attitude to democracy: "We have won the election, so we do not care what anyone thinks. We will do what we want to do." Do you think that as we would see it, political Islam is not liberal, or do you think that political Islam could move on from the winner-takes-all attitude to democracy?

Mr Ellwood: I think there are too few examples for us to make a firm judgment on that. There have been mixed results, if we are honest. I mentioned Morocco and Tunisia as good examples of where political Islam movements have advanced the country into a more democratic space, but much work needs to happen. Through various programmes, we are fully engaging with those countries to assist them.

The example that has been cited—we will no doubt come on to it again—is what happened with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It was trying to take the country in a very different direction, with the consequences that we are all aware of. There are too few democratic systems in play in the Middle East and North Africa, but there is a maturity that we need to encourage. We also have to bear in mind, however, that they come from a very socially conservative base. We therefore need to inject change at a pace that works for them, and not trigger something more extreme. The best example of that is Saudi Arabia, where the royal family and the establishment are on the liberal wing of a very conservative society. If things are moved too quickly, we could see a backlash, which would be unhelpful. We need to avoid that.

Q164 **Mr Hendrick:** Leaving aside regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, that come from royalty and are trying to become more liberal, the FCO in written evidence has said that "in some cases" the participation of political Islamist groups in the democratic process was "purely tactical"—that is, they see the use of democracy as a means of getting to a state where



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democracy is no longer required, resulting in what effectively would be a caliphate. They see democracy as just a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. What is your comment on that?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, I mean—how can we clarify that? When we say that it is “purely tactical”, sometimes the noises are made suggesting that they are embracing certain democratic values in order to appease the international community, and to give the right signals on where they want to go. Once they are in power, they do something very different. We just need to be very cautious, look at the results, work with them, and encourage advancement, so that it is a real and lasting conversion and commitment to the democratic process.

Q165 **Mr Hendrick:** By that I meant that they are not necessarily being inclusive and pluralistic. They have taken power and are carrying out things that they said they wouldn't do. They are actually moving away from democracy, in that they want what they want, full stop. They are negating the use of democracy at some stage in the future, once they have got a grip of the system.

Mr Ellwood: I think you make the point for me. That is exactly what we need to be aware of, and we must encourage it not to happen. There is a role for the international community to play, and the role is a sensitive one because of the threat of being seen to interfere. In the advancement in the modern age of a new democracy that has an Islamic flavour to it, the international community can certainly play a supporting role in encouraging that to happen in the right direction.

Q166 **Andrew Rosindell:** The Foreign Affairs Committee went to Egypt five years ago, when there was a bit of euphoria about the Arab spring. We thought that that was the new version of the fall of the Berlin wall, and that democracy and freedom were going to be brought to the Middle East, but that was not to be. We met Mr Morsi, who went on to be President of Egypt. What went wrong? What, in your view, led to what has happened since and the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013? What were the circumstances that led to that circumstance occurring?

Mr Ellwood: That is a very good question. There are three areas, in summary, that I suggest were of concern. First, there was growing public despair at the mishandling of Egypt's economy. If you visited, you will be aware that the tourism aspect is absolutely critical. There is the open and secular environment in which Egypt has thrived. Even under various dictators, there has been a thriving middle class. With the economy being threatened, that is critical to the country. Morsi was not seen to be the answer to improve that.

I think there was also a monopoly of power. Going back to the point Mr Hendrick made about the promises that were made leading up to the elections, I recall visiting—I went with the Chair on one visit—and the Muslim Brotherhood's promises. They said that they wouldn't even put up a President, that they just wanted to participate in supporting the elections. Then each time I went back again, I learned that they had



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reneged on the last claim—that they were actually putting up parliamentary candidates and, eventually, a President, too. There was resistance, if you like, to the monopoly of power that the Muslim Brotherhood was creating.

Going back to the middle class and the secular nature of the country, I think there was a rejection of the attempted Islamisation of the Egyptian state and society. It wasn't where the country wanted to go. For those three reasons, we saw the scale of uprising that eventually led to the removal of Morsi.

Q167 Andrew Rosindell: Do you think that the security forces in Egypt encouraged the situation to come about, to give them the excuse to remove an elected President? Or is it the Government's view that what happened was right and necessary?

Mr Ellwood: It is difficult. I wasn't in office at the time; I was a Back Bencher with a huge interest in what was going on. I can give you the official position as it was judged then, looking back at it now. We never support military interventions as such. From my own reflections—I don't know whether Mr Crompton wants to add to this—initially the military were nervous about wanting to get too involved in what was happening, but it became clear that such was the popular uprising that we were going to a very dark chapter, which is why we saw the events roll out as they did.

Q168 Chair: I was there, and I saw our ambassador at the time on two separate visits in July 2013. I implored him when I left on 31 July 2013 for us to *démarche* the Egyptian Government, to say that absolutely the worst thing that could happen was that the military should do what they then subsequently did two weeks later. What happened? What was our attitude at the time?

Mr Ellwood: As I say, I am happy to look back at the records and give you a more detailed—

Q169 Chair: I am challenging your view that the "dark chapter" was if the military had not got involved. The "dark chapter" began when the military chose to kill a very substantial number of people, by machine gun fire, rifle fire and fire, as they cleared the centre of the demonstration on 13 August 2013. Since then, the Egyptian economy has gone into freefall; there are 40,000 people in jail; and there are people being sentenced to death in batches of 500, alongside the litany of casualties that have come in the wake of that. I would describe that as a pretty "dark chapter" opening up. I am just interested in what attitude we took at the time about whether we were trying to avert that. You are suggesting that actually it was necessary, which rather alarms me.

Mr Ellwood: No, Chair, I think you are being a bit disingenuous. I made it very, very clear that I was not the Minister responsible for then. William Hague was the Foreign Secretary at the time. We made expressions of concern through the European Foreign Affairs Council as well as to the UN Human Rights Council. We made our case very clear that we were very



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concerned about what was actually happening and we made representations to the Egyptian Government as well. But if you want detail—chapter and verse—on that, Sir, I am not the person to give you that, because—

Q170 **Chair:** Well, I hope Mr Crompton might have some grasp of the history of the time; I presume that he does.

Mr Ellwood: Certainly. I will hand over to him. But all I am saying is that the best person to give these very important questions—you could invite one of the Ministers, or William Hague himself, to come and answer them, if that is an avenue that you wish to pursue.

Q171 **Chair:** But you were the one advancing a thesis that the final suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom of Justice party movement, in the way that it was literally cleared off the streets—

Mr Ellwood: No, I think you are putting words into my mouth. What I would say is that, if you want the detail of the Government position of the time, then I invite you to invite the Minister at the time—

Q172 **Chair:** I am inviting Mr Crompton, who is obviously the responsible official and who I presume has some understanding of what actually happened at the time.

Neil Crompton: Well, I can offer some understanding. I held office, but I was not in my current job at the time, either. I think I would answer the question in a slightly different way. Clearly, there was a tumultuous set of events in Egypt in 2011. There was a popular revolution and then a form of representative Government, which the Muslim Brotherhood came through. I think there was a split political culture in Egypt. I think many—

Q173 **Chair:** No. I understand that, Mr Crompton. I am asking what interventions did we make with the Egyptian military and the Egyptian Government after the military took power on 30 June, before they cleared the demonstrations with the use of lethal force.

Neil Crompton: I think that the Minister has answered that the interventions were made by the Government and I, too, would have to go back and check our files for chapter and verse.

Chair: I would be grateful if you could supply chapter and verse to us as soon as is reasonably practical—let's say the end of next week— on what interventions we actually made at that time with what was in effect then the Egyptian military authorities.

Q174 **Ann Clwyd:** I wanted to ask you about the policies of political Islamists in power. Have you seen examples of political Islamists pressing particular points of Islamic doctrine while in power, or are they being more pragmatic?

Mr Ellwood: I think it goes back to the question—a similar question—that was raised earlier. There are examples whereby political Islam has made democratic process, and Morocco and Tunisia are the best examples of that. We have just touched on a very important area—I understand that



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the Committee is interested in it—where it has not gone well, and where the people themselves did not recognise the advanced role of political Islam in society itself in Egypt. We also see more extremist cases, where I would go further and say that, from any perspective, the religion of Islam has been completely hijacked for a violent cause. The best example of that is Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

Q175 Ann Clwyd: In terms of human rights, the FCO evidence says that “in some cases” there has been “systematic abuse” by political Islamist groups. Which groups are you referring to?

Mr Ellwood: I suppose that the best example is Iraq, where there is evidence of political Islamist groups abusing their access to power and abusing human rights. We have raised that with the Government, and it has been, I’m afraid, an unhelpful distraction from some of the bigger challenges we are facing in that country.

Q176 Ann Clwyd: Have other Governments in the Middle East, whether more religious in character or more secular, performed better than the political Islamists on these key counts?

Mr Ellwood: As I say, in North Africa there has been a better understanding and recognition. The consequence of what happened in Egypt has been seen elsewhere and has encouraged a wider space for a more tolerant approach to the involvement of Islam in society itself, and that is to be encouraged.

Q177 Mr Baron: One of the things this Committee is trying to get to the bottom of is the extent to which political Islam succumbs to violence or indeed perpetrates it. While accepting that no two situations are alike and, as per my earlier question, that there needs to be an element of tolerance in our understanding—the broad brushes of history, etc.—can you give us a better feel of whether you and the Foreign Office believe that political Islamists are victims or perpetrators of violence?

Mr Ellwood: There are probably examples of both. In one case, they have tried to be involved in democratic governance and it has not happened; they were turned away from being involved in the democratic process and therefore used violence as a means of power. What happened in Fallujah is the best example of that. The Sunnis were denied any space to participate in Baghdad politics because of the previous Maliki Government and resorted in extremis to solidifying an advance of al-Qaeda in the form of Daesh, and we are all aware of the consequences itself. And where violence has been perpetuated by them, of course, the best example of that is the Muslim Brotherhood.

Q178 Mr Baron: I agree that there are good and bad examples of practice but why does the UK reject the definition held in some countries that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organisation?

Mr Ellwood: We make our own evaluation under our own set of guidelines. You can imagine that our guidelines, our approach and our culture—we have evolved tolerance, freedom of expression and so forth—will be different from those of other nations. We make our own



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assessment of these matters. Although we listen to the concerns of others, we have to be firm in what we are doing. This is a very sensitive area. As we learned with the Muslim Brotherhood report, there are many who want us to go one way and many who want us to go another way, and we have to be quite firm that we can stand by what we assess and make our own evaluations.

Q179 Mr Baron: Do you think that touches on a wider issue? Even allies in the region—Saudi Arabia would be one example when you are thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood, and one can think of examples going the other way—find it difficult to agree on the central issues when it comes to extremism, political Islam and so forth. We have even seen allies intervene in places such as Libya and break UN arms embargoes and sanctions, which is not helping the situation in Libya. I set that as another example.

It does not bode well for those who want to put a one-size-fits-all category on this, does it? There has got to be flexibility in our understanding and tolerance and, indeed, our definition because you are not going to find two situations the same. That is not helped by the fact that the regional allies also take that view and can often disagree with us.

Mr Ellwood: I absolutely agree that it is a very challenging environment that we face and it differs widely across the piece. That is compounded by the fact that there are many communities—peoples—within these countries more aware of different attitudes across the world through the internet and so forth. They are perhaps seeking differing levels of involvement of religion in society itself. That is something on which we in our country spent many years, through many wars, in recognising the role of the Church within our state. That is something that in the longer term is continually going to be of concern and interest to the Muslim world.

Q180 Mr Baron: I do not think you will disagree with my final question. It encourages one to go down the road that the more we understand the events on the ground and the forces at play, the better our chances of achieving objectives for the benefit of all. It comes down to resource at the end of the day within key policy-making institutions such as the FCO and ensuring that we have that expertise. If we don't, it increases the chances of making bad decisions, does it not?

Mr Ellwood: You have made this point before, including on the Floor of the House. I hope that the former Foreign Secretary, who now finds himself in the Treasury, hears and recognises that. We have an extremely small budget in comparison with France, perhaps. But there is our reach with the number of posts that we have in order to understand this. Reaching out to local understanding, with think tanks and others, is important as well, in order to create an intelligence picture and, you are right, that is absolutely critical.

Q181 Mr Baron: You should keep banging the drum.

Mr Ellwood: I will—and thank you for also making the case.

Q182 Chair: Which countries have declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be a

terrorist organisation?

Mr Ellwood: Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Egypt and Syria.

Q183 **Chair:** Why do we reject that definition?

Mr Ellwood: I think I have answered that question. The experiences and standards that they are looking through, the lens through which they approach these things, will be slightly different from how we look at them. As the report identifies, we are aware that there are elements and groups that are inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. We have proscribed some al-Ikhwani groups that are Muslim Brotherhood inspired, such as Hamas.

There are others if you go off to Kuwait or Jordan. The Muslim Brotherhood remains active through political parties. Our judgment has been to look across the piece better to understand—the point made by Mr Baron—what the Muslim Brotherhood is doing and what it is up to in this country as well. That is why we came to the conclusions that we did.

Q184 **Chair:** How much do you see Hamas's violence as illegal violence, under the Geneva convention, with indiscriminate weapons and everything else it is targeting as part of the Palestinian resistance to occupation? How much do you see that as driven by its ideology?

Mr Ellwood: That is a difficult question to specify completely. The actions that they have taken are illegal. They continue the tunnel building and so forth. The attacks that are persisting into Israel proper are against Geneva conventions. We know and understand that. They are perpetuated by the military wing of Hamas and it is that that is proscribed.

Q185 **Chair:** I understand that. But if you look at Hamas as a movement, and the way that they use illegal violence against what they would see as an occupying power, how much of that is inspired by their ideology, and how much of it is just what they do as a military movement, and that is why they are proscribed, so it has nothing to do with the fact that they are an Islamist movement?

Mr Ellwood: Maybe Mr Crompton can add to this. What is the ideology? When you speak to some of the countries that are more engaged with Hamas, they say to you that they have reneged on certain types of violence and they recognise the state of Israel. When you look at its own charter, that charter has not changed, so where does the ideology sit? You then look at Hamas itself and it is not a homogenous operation. It has various wings which are not necessarily under the full control of the political leadership. That is the challenge that we face in working out how you can influence any insurgency. You as ex-military men will know that we do not defeat this by military means alone. It will be through eventual negotiations that we will get to the guns finally falling silent.

Neil Crompton: If I may, Mr Chairman, I will add a bit of comment on your question. There probably is a slightly nationalist element to Palestinian violence, against what they see as the existence of the state of Israel, but there is also a religious, Islamist dimension to that. Opposition to the state of Israel is a strongly held and shared view by many political



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Islamic groups, some of which exercise violence and others of which exercise their views vocally but do not act on them. I think it is a component of the opposition.

Q186 Mike Gapes: Can I take you to the Muslim Brotherhood review, which you have already mentioned? To be clear, the written evidence that we received from the FCO, a little while ago now, closely matched the main findings of the Muslim Brotherhood review.

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased to hear that that is the case.

Q187 Mike Gapes: You may not like the next part of the question. Given the way in which the new Prime Minister and the new Government are dumping various parts of David Cameron's legacy, can you confirm that the FCO does agree today with all the main findings of the Muslim Brotherhood review?

Mr Ellwood: This report is now two years old.

Mike Gapes: That is why I am asking the question.

Mr Ellwood: Life obviously advances. Let's go back to the purpose of this, which was to help the Government—the Executive—better understand what is a very complex issue. I appreciate that its confidentiality has spurred a huge amount of interest from people wanting to understand more about what is in the report. In hindsight, I think we would perhaps have conducted the review more on an internal basis rather than it being as widely publicised as it was, because if you widely publicise something of course everybody then wants to see the detail. I understand that.

Q188 Mike Gapes: Can you answer my question please? I asked you specifically, "Does the Government now agree with all the main findings of the Muslim Brotherhood review?"

Mr Ellwood: I do not have any reason to alter anything, as my submission said. My submission was not written two years ago—it was written quite recently. We are honouring that.

I also challenge, if I may, the fact that the new Prime Minister is "dumping" previous policy. I just place that on record. Of course, any new Prime Minister stamps their own personality—

Q189 Mike Gapes: Not as regards the foreign policy yet, then? Okay. On the question, do you disagree with any aspects of the review?

Mr Ellwood: As I say, this report was written two years ago, so I think to start opening up this question of whether I disagree or agree—We have seen an advancement of the situation in what is happening in Egypt and elsewhere. The whole purpose of the review—I underline this—was to better inform what is happening, who the Muslim Brotherhood actually is, where it operates from and how it is impacting across the piece. So there is no reason to make up statements to say whether it is still valid or not.

Mike Gapes: The difficulty I have is that the Committee has not been allowed to see the full version. We have been given only the sanitised



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version. We asked the Prime Minister whether we could have the whole version and we were told, "No, you can't."

Chair: We asked him twice, and we invited the Prime Minister to place any restrictions on the confidentiality of it and how we should have access to it and read it. It was twice declined, so you will understand that the co-operation this Committee has had in this inquiry from Her Majesty's Government—I know this may not be your responsibility or your decision—falls somewhat short of what one would expect to help us produce the best possible piece of work. Please continue, Mr Gapes.

Q190 **Mike Gapes:** Can I continue the questioning? You have just said to me that you are continuing a policy based upon the main findings, which we are aware of, and you have not named any area where you disagree with those findings, but then you threw in a statement that referred to Egypt. Clearly the situation in Egypt has developed adversely, not in a positive way, over the last period. Are we to now assume that there are no parts of the review that we are not aware of and have not seen that in any way contradict or say different things from what is in public? Are you satisfied that your position today is consistent with all aspects of the review, including the bits we have not seen?

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry you are taking offence at the fact that you have been denied access to this particular document. To put it in context, the Government task many, many documents that are designed for the Government themselves to better understand the situation and which then lead to public documents. The best example from the Muslim Brotherhood study is our counter-extremism strategy. That is something that is policy; that is something that we build upon. In fact, we are now working with other countries and across the region to make that happen. The study was a vehicle of learning for us to create the policy on which your work of scrutinising the Government and holding it to account should be focused.

Mike Gapes: It is for us to decide where we focus our inquiries, actually.

Q191 **Chair:** The fact is that it is a point of learning. I am deeply grateful for your assistance. Actually—obviously I am being deeply sarcastic—you have obstructed this Committee's learning from the work that was done in the review carried out by Sir John Jenkins. That is not terribly helpful, given that we gave you an undertaking that we would respect any confidentiality requirement that surrounded it. I am just putting that on the record.

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry you take that attitude. From a Government perspective, we have to share the findings of any report, but I think we have to set a precedent here. The precedent is already set that the Government can commission work that is done internally. There is an awful lot of confidential material that comes from other Governments as well. I think David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, made that point either in evidence to you or in writing, so it will be familiar to you. Although of course you can focus your energies wherever you like, my understanding is that the Committee's work is supposed to scrutinise



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Government policy. If you have questions to do with the Muslim Brotherhood and what we are doing, please ask them, but to ask for a two-year-old report in order to base what our current policy is—

Chair: You had a go on a previous occasion at suggesting where we should be focused as a Select Committee. I don't think we want to get into that territory.

Mike Gapes: Can I just get it absolutely clear? Does the Government today agree with all the parts of the Muslim Brotherhood review, including the parts that you have not made public to this Committee?

Mr Ellwood: As I say, we stand by the public report that we made on the Muslim Brotherhood, which we have shared with you. Further to that—

Q192 **Mike Gapes:** I'm not asking about the public report; I'm asking about the whole report—the entirety of it.

Mr Ellwood: Sir, the report has lots of evidence in it, rather than drawing the main conclusions. The main conclusions have been shared with you.

Q193 **Mike Gapes:** But the main conclusions are not everything and I want to know whether you are endorsing all the conclusions as written, both what you have internally and what you have chosen to give to us in public.

Mr Ellwood: I stand by the report. I can't be any plainer than that. I stand by the report and my evidence—

Q194 **Mike Gapes:** Which report? What you have given publicly, or what?

Mr Ellwood: My evidence to you has, as you opened up in your question—my evidence to you, my submission to you, closely followed that, and that is absolutely the case.

Q195 **Mike Gapes:** I am clearly not going to get any further. Can I ask one final question: the author of the Muslim Brotherhood review was Sir John Jenkins. He wrote it—he is no longer in that position—while he was serving as the ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Some critics of this review and its conclusions have implied that that meant he had a conflicted view, in the sense that Saudi Arabia clearly had a very strong interest in this report. How would you respond to that criticism?

Mr Ellwood: As you say, it is some critics. It is not a view that I take at all. I hope that in your experience, as you go about your business and travel abroad, you find any ambassador and, indeed, any of the Foreign Office team in any post are exemplars of professionalism and support for you—

Mike Gapes: I agree with you.

Mr Ellwood: And they are committed to working for Her Majesty's Government. In the same way that Her Majesty's Government might change from a Labour party to a Conservative party Government, and their commitment to the cause, whatever that cause might be, will be unchanged, in this case, simply because you have an ambassador who is



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working in Saudi Arabia, to somehow suggest that the report might be biased is I think disingenuous. I would like to confirm that in all cases our ambassadors work diligently, across the world, without prejudice, without compassion towards the country that they are working towards, but with diligence and commitment to the country that they serve.

Q196 **Mike Gapes:** I am not making that accusation. I think the problem is the perception. There are critics who want, if you like, some hook on which to pin an argument. It is about perceptions, not about reality. Personally I think John Jenkins wrote a very good article in the *New Statesman* some time ago, which covers these areas, and raised a number of important issues, which I think are also reflected in his review.

Mr Ellwood: I am not an avid reader of the *New Statesman* but I did read that and I would commend it to anybody for fully understanding the background towards Daesh.

Q197 **Mike Gapes:** So, clearly somebody who understands the subject. The point I am making, however, is the perception of people who wish to criticise.

Mr Ellwood: I would invite you, Mr Gapes, to rise above those critics and stick to your gut feeling, which is that this is an honourable report written by an honourable person.

Q198 **Mike Gapes:** Oh, dear; you don't have to insult members of the Committee—

Mr Ellwood: I am not insulting you at all. You yourself are advocating his professionalism—

Mike Gapes: It is my job to ask questions.

Mr Ellwood: And we should not be distracted by some critics—you have not even mentioned who they are.

Q199 **Chair:** Well, let's start with me then. If you are on the receiving end of this report; if you are being inquired into; if you are the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, given when this report was commissioned—and this is a movement that won four successive elections of one variety or another in Egypt; the Muslim Brotherhood have won elections elsewhere, they have very substantial popular support across the region everywhere, which is seeing its form in various political parties. Presumably, if we are going to conduct an inquiry that is splattered all over the media—it was extremely newsworthy in the region that we were conducting it—and then it becomes clear that the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia is to conduct it, do you think that there is a chance of it being perceived as a fair piece of work before it has even begun? The appointment of Sir John Jenkins, however capable and equipped he is to carry out this report, sent a signal to the people on the receiving end of the inquiry that meant they would take a view on it before it had even begun, did it not? It was not a very clever appointment, surely.



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Mr Ellwood: I disagree with you, politely. First, I apologise to Mr Gapes, if he took offence at anything I said. You said “critics”—are you now saying that the Saudi ambassador—

Q200 **Chair:** I would say that it was a pretty clumsy appointment—to appoint our ambassador to Saudi Arabia to conduct an inquiry into the Muslim Brotherhood, because the Muslim Brotherhood, of whatever variety, Egyptian or otherwise, will think that it was a set-up job, done at the behest of the country to which he happened to be Her Majesty’s representative. It placed that review under a disadvantage before it even started.

Mr Ellwood: No, the Muslim Brotherhood report was extremely helpful in providing an understanding of the movement. It also led, as I say, to the development of our counter-extremism strategy. I think that the appointment was an astute one, and I stand by that.

Q201 **Nadhim Zahawi:** I apologise, Chair, but, Minister, presumably many of the ambassadors in the Middle East would have served in Saudi Arabia at some point in their careers. The idea that John Jenkins was not appropriate would mean excluding lots of other ambassadors who might at some point have served in Saudi. Would that be true?

Neil Crompton: I think it would. The ambassador to Saudi Arabia is a senior Arabist post, and John was the most experienced Arabist in the Foreign Office. He had done my job, he had served in Tripoli, he was consul-general in Jerusalem, and I know he served in Kuwait when he was younger—he also served in Burma, I recall, in a different role. So he had done a range of different jobs, both in our overseas network and in London. Certainly, in British academia he is widely respected both for his expertise and for his integrity.

Q202 **Yasmin Qureshi:** As I understand what the Chair was saying, it was about what other people’s perception might be. Those being reviewed might consider that the gentleman was not impartial—I do not think that anyone here is challenging Sir John Jenkins’s abilities or capabilities to lead an independent report. The Chair is trying to suggest how it might be perceived by others.

On the question of the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence, did the inquiry look into the violence used and directed against the Brotherhood in Egypt, especially in 2013? If so, do we know what was found? Perhaps that is going into Mr Gapes’s territory of the parts of the report that we do not know about.

Chair: Given how close we are to the end of our formal questions to you, may I make a suggestion? We have a couple of questions and some follow-up questions to the session that I would like to have the opportunity to put on the record. I will write to you with those, and will bring this part of our public proceedings to an end. Minister and Mr Compton, thank you very much indeed for coming to give us evidence.