



Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence: Transformation of power in the Middle East and the implications for UK foreign policy

Wednesday 2 November 2016

10.30 am

[Listen to the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Inglewood; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 20 - 29

Witnesses

I: Mr Neil Crompton, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Mr Nicholas Abbott, Head, Middle East and North Africa, Central Operations Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Mr Tom Pravda, Head of HMG's Daesh Taskforce and Head of Iraq Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Mr Neil Crompton, Mr Nicholas Abbott and Mr Tom Pravda.

Q20 The Chairman: Good morning, and thank you very much for coming before us. You are all from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I am obliged to remind you that this session is webcast and open to the public and that a verbatim transcript will come out, of which you will get a copy and which can be clarified, amplified or amended as you wish in due course. Those are the basic formalities. I repeat that we are very grateful to you for sparing your time, with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ever busier. I have no doubt that you are all busier in all aspects as well. These are the early stages of an inquiry that the Committee is conducting into what might best be called the transformation of power, the changes in the power centres of the Middle East, and how they affect United Kingdom policy but also global policy, and all aspects ranging from China's involvement to the changing position of Saudi Arabia, Iran and so on. The change in the dispersal and fragmentation of power is very much our focus. I will start with a general question, and I am very happy for all three of you to answer. I shall start with Mr Crompton, but do please chip in if you feel it necessary on this question, or any others that follow.

Let us start with the bigger picture and go back to the so-called Arab spring in the earlier part of this century, the assessment then of where it would lead, the realisation of where it has led in some areas and how you think the UK has adapted to this unfolding scene, which in many ways has belied high hopes and produced what is, frankly, an amazing labyrinth of difficulty and violence today.

Neil Crompton: Thank you, Lord Chairman. It is a big question, as you say. For someone like me, who did Middle East studies at university a long time ago, we used to think of the Middle East as an unstable region but actually it was remarkably stable in terms of continuity of governance, whether they be monarchies, republics or dictatorships, punctuated by occasional conflicts into which the UK was drawn. Obviously the Arab spring and the convulsions that flowed from the overthrow of many of the old systems have changed that sense of certainty. As you say, we have a set of myriad conflicts and political challenges. There is no longer any real sense of certainty about the region or its stability. That has meant a profound change in the way that we have to deal with it, and inevitably a lot of what we are doing is trying to deal with the crises of the day.

For me as the geographical director, I think we have three big sets of generic policy issues in the Middle East. First, we have what I call the failures of governance challenges, as a result of either the Arab spring, our interventions or a combination of both. I would put Iraq, Syria and Libya in that category. I will also put Yemen in that category, although the context there is a bit different, in that it was a failing state before the Arab spring, and the Arab spring only accelerated the process. The

second set of challenges is how we balance our regional interests. We have traditional partners in the region that are very important to us, such as the Gulf states, Egypt and Israel, and we see an opportunity through the Iran nuclear deal, which we thought was a very important accomplishment, to start the process of bringing Iran back into the international community. However, many of our partners in the region—the Israelis and the Gulf states—feel threatened by Iran, so we need to balance our interests. Iran continues to pursue some policies, particularly in its racial behaviour, which we object to, and we need to work with our Gulf partners to push back against those.

There is a third set of challenges around what I loosely call the short term versus long term, ensuring that we devote enough time to trying to promote the sort of sustainable political and economic reform in the region that will prevent a repeat of the events of 2011. Many of the underlying causes of the Arab spring, such as the sense of economic disempowerment among young people and demographic trends, have not really been addressed by any of the Governments in the region. So we have devoted a certain amount of time to trying to ensure that we can promote sustainable economic and political reform.

Other things have changed: the world has become more complex. Twenty years ago, when making Middle Eastern policy, the Foreign Secretary could call Washington, perhaps Riyadh or Cairo and possibly Tel Aviv, and solve maybe 85% of our policy. Today we find that the number of actors have changed. There are more sub-state actors, and regional power has shifted. Many of the big players in the region now are not Arabs; Turkey, Iran and Israel have become much more important. The Gulf states have become relatively more important as partners as the rest of the region has become convulsed by instability. Egypt remains a very important partner, but it has spent much of the last five years internally focused.

The Chairman: You talk about the end of certainty. Would it be unfair to suggest that the Arab spring was clouded with beliefs that it was another Prague Spring, and that democracy and liberty would immediately arise? They did not, so this got it quite badly wrong. Were there consequences from that disappointment—let us put it like that—that led to changes of policy? Were there costs for getting the assessment wrong?

Neil Crompton: I have two comments, and colleagues might want to come in. It was termed the Arab spring early on, for obvious reasons. I always thought it was a bit of a misnomer. Part of the challenge was that, unlike the Prague Spring, there was no real intellectual undercurrent to the change that came about. It was spontaneous. There were no Vaclav Havel figures; there was no tradition of democracy in the region. Most political parties and the political space had been squeezed so that there were no organised groups, other than some of the Islamist groups, which were well positioned to acquire more political power during the period.

You can debate whether the West made mistakes, and it would be interesting to see the conclusions. The Arab spring came at a very bad time for us, in the midst of a financial crisis, when the West was

essentially broke. There is an argument, for example, that in the case of Egypt, had we been able to provide large-scale economic support that would have allowed it to make some important economic reforms up front but would have involved buying off political opposition as it moved to cut through subsidies and other things, the transition would have been smoother. In the end, the West could muster only \$7 billion, and we found that other countries in the region that were less keen on reform than Egypt were able to provide considerably larger sums of money. So it is an historical accident that it happened at a time when the West was preoccupied with its own internal economic problems.

Lord Grocott: I picked up a phrase you used in your general summary of Britain's involvement. You talked about various conflicts into which the UK "was drawn" in the Middle East. This is a very general question, but the level of our involvement across the Middle East is staggering. We are in a post-colonial period but you would barely know it sometimes from the involvement militarily, diplomatically and mentally—if that is the right word. Is that level of involvement about right, or should we be more involved or less involved? I cannot quite imagine a Committee like this sitting in state in the Middle East discussing the implications of Scotland leaving the United Kingdom or something of that sort, but we think nothing of doing exactly the same in reverse. Is the scale right?

Neil Crompton: Personally, I think it is, but that is a very valid question. Historically, we have always been involved in the Middle East. It is Europe's back yard.

Lord Grocott: That is an odd way of describing it. Do they describe Europe as being the Middle East's back yard, I wonder?

Neil Crompton: The West has an interest in resolving conflicts like the Arab/Israeli conflict. We have had important commercial and security relationships there; the Gulf states, for example, are our sixth largest market in the world. We have important historical relationships. One thing I omitted to say in my opening remarks is that one of the things that has changed since the Arab spring is that, because of the instability there, threats from the Middle East are now coming directly into the homeland. Some of this always existed—there was a brief spell of, for example, Palestinian terrorism in London in the 1970s, and the al-Qaeda phenomenon was associated with parts of the Middle East. But since 2011, the global centre of Islamic jihad has shifted from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Middle East through Daesh. That affects our current domestic communities in a much more significant way than al-Qaeda ever did. Over 80 Britons who have gone to fight?

Neil Crompton: Of course, the new phenomenon in the past two or three years has been not only the conflict in Syria but also, because of the instability in sub-Saharan Africa, the migration problem. Whether or not we want to scale back, our national security interests draw us towards more engagement upstream, as do our commercial interests. That is certainly the view that Ministers have taken. In the United States there is a profound debate—this is an interesting discussion that we may

well have here too—about the level of US interests in the Middle East and whether historically, or at least for the past 20 years, they have overinvested in the Middle East. We are seeing a process of retrenchment from the region, which in turn affects our ability to get things done.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: You mentioned that previously the Foreign Secretary's first calls would be to Washington, Tel Aviv and so on, which would sort out about 85% of the policy. I am wondering who the Foreign Secretary calls first now. Who does he call to try to resolve 85% of problems now?

Neil Crompton: He has to call more people, and some of the people he calls are not receptive. Obviously, Washington is still an important first point of call, and Paris, Berlin and Brussels are all very important. Of the regional players, Riyadh and some of the smaller Gulf states—Abu Dhabi, Qatar—have become important in a way that they were not when I first joined the Foreign Office, because they are willing to exercise influence overseas. Thereafter it depends on the issue. Turkey is an active player on all these issues, as, for better or for worse, is Iran; there is a dialogue to be had with them but it is very complicated. Then, as I am sure we will come on to, there is a range of sub-state actors: the Kurds, for example, have become relatively more important to our interests. So it varies very much from issue to issue.

The Chairman: I am a little uneasy about some of your answers. It sounds to me as though the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and our experts and policymakers were aware that the certainty was ending, but were they aware that we were living in a new world of connectivity and networks that was going to disperse very rapidly the power of the previous rulers—in some cases, tyrants—and lead to their overthrow at incredible speed? Was that appreciated? After all, that is what happened. It was almost as though the leaders were not aware what was going to hit them, and our policymakers were not aware of the overriding power of the communication revolution in taking power to the streets.

Neil Crompton: It is certainly true that leaders in the region did not recognise this or see it coming. Baroness Helic is better placed to answer this because she was sitting next to the Foreign Secretary when it all happened. I think we underestimated this, partly because for many years we had Government-to-Government contacts, which tend to take place with leaders, security services and intelligence services. As you said at the beginning, we are all busy and we perhaps have less time than we did to travel around countries and talk to lots of people; very often, the host Governments did not do that. So we probably underestimated the sense of discontent that there was around the region. That combination of discontent allied to Twitter and social media generally—in Egypt, for example—was a new phenomenon, although we had had a glimpse of it. We Arabists tend to forget the importance of Iran, but historically what happens in Iran often takes place two or three years ahead of what happens in the Arab world—Mosaddeq in the 1950s preceded Nasser—and the green revolution was the first popular uprising in a country that

was played out live on TV and through social media. Some of that rippled through the Arab world three or four years later.

The Chairman: I want to get on to whether we had a wrong reaction to a wrong assessment, but Lord Inglewood has a question here.

Lord Inglewood: In response to Lord Purvis's question about the Foreign Secretary's telephone list, you then bracketed the names of those countries with sub-state actors. Is he putting people such as the leader of the Kurds on his telephone list? If you are right and they are also important, surely he ought to.

Neil Crompton: He does talk to the leaders of the Kurds.

Lord Inglewood: In the same way?

Neil Crompton: Not as regularly, but the Kurds are extremely important actors, both in Iraq and in the fight against Daesh. However, they do not have a role in, say, Yemen.

Lord Inglewood: No, but in terms of exercising our policies and influence in the Middle East, we do not necessarily discriminate between states and non-states; we are interested in the power politics. Is that right?

Neil Crompton: I think that is right.

Tom Pravda: May I add to that? Yes, we engage with the actors who have a locus on what is happening and can help to influence that, but with the Kurds in Iraq we are very clear about the primacy of the Government in Baghdad as the sovereign Government for the whole country of Iraq. Our engagement with the Kurds is calibrated in that way, including in the fight against Daesh. They are a meaningful actor, but they are an Iraqi actor and part of the Iraqi effort against Daesh specifically.

Neil Crompton: Certainly, every Minister I know who goes to visit Iraq regularly will go to Baghdad and then visit Erbil, for consultations with both.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: You have very clearly described the background to the Arab spring and our reaction to it. Could you have a shot at looking ahead and say roughly where you think this process we are living through at the moment will come to any kind of stability again? Are we facing something like after the French Revolution with a counterrevolution in the form of Napoleon—in this case perhaps in the form of people like Sisi—that will stabilise the situation for a certain period again, as it did in Europe in the early 19th century up to 1848, which is quite a long period of time? Could you say where you think this process might lead rather than just straightforward hand-to-mouth responses to events?

The Chairman: Could I just add that I think this is the first time I have

ever heard it suggested that Napoleon stabilised the situation?

Neil Crompton: There is a lot of academic debate: is this the equivalent of the 30 years' war? At what point are we—five years or 10 years? The honest answer is that we do not know. A lot will depend on the outcomes of the areas of governance. There is a scenario in which in three years' time Iraq is on a solid path and Daesh are defeated, and the Iraqi political class makes the sort of political reforms and addresses sectarian policies that prevent the resurgence of Daesh III; in a sense, Daesh is al-Qaeda II. There is a scenario in which we reach a settlement with Russia and Iran, the key regional players in Syria, which leads to a return to a broadly representative form of government in Syria. We think that we have a long way to go on Libya, but Libya is ultimately resolvable. If you remove those three big sources of instability in the region, it is possible to predict a much more stable situation in the next three to five years. But we will still be left with some of the bigger questions around good economic and political governance.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Can you throw in Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Neil Crompton: Yes, there is a separate dimension to this, in Iran and the regional competition between Iran and in shorthand Saudi Arabia, although there is a broader tension between the Arab world and Israel and Iran. It used to be a cold war, and it has been essentially a hot war for the last three or four years, playing out in Syria and Yemen. It is a cold war in Iraq, really. The positive scenario is that you can come to an equilibrium in the region in which, if there is a settlement in Syria, it will see the removal of President Assad, who has been Iran's historical ally in the region, and a more representative Government. That would see a net reduction in Iranian influence. At the moment, Iranian influence in Iraq is artificially high, partly because the Arab world since the invasion has largely neglected Iraq. In a stable Iraq, Iranian influence would be reduced, and a scenario would develop in which we would reach a diplomatic settlement in Yemen, whereby the Gulf states would choose to invest a lot more money in Yemen than they have done historically, squeezing the Iranian influence there. The countries in the region can relax a bit more, as we move from the hot war to a cold war, back to détente and then back to a more traditional balance between the regions. But I could give you many worse scenarios, too.

The Chairman: I think that we are getting on towards the next question, from Baroness Helic.

- Q21 **Baroness Helic:** I am delighted to hear that there is a positive scenario. Without too much elaboration, could you say whether Russia will play a stabilising factor in that positive scenario? Also, I wish I could answer some questions that you are answering now, but I cannot. I remember at the beginning of the Arab spring something called the Arab development fund was set up, which fed into the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, which is around £1 billion a year. Could you shed some light on how and where that has been spent and what kind of impact it has had? I fully understand that it has been active only from 2015, so you probably do

not have the full results yet—but perhaps you could give us a bit of a flavour.

Neil Crompton: Russia has always been involved in Syria, but there is a sense in which it is back in the Middle East in a big way—a bigger way than it has been, really. The last time Russia was this important in the Middle East was in the early 1970s when Sadat expelled it from Egypt. They played a secondary role in Iraq and in Syria, but they are now back. Putin, as part of his world approach, is determined to make a statement, which is a new calculation. He is, as all analysts would say, filling some of the space used by the US withdrawal. We do not think that his military intervention in Syria has been constructive, not least because of the extraordinary numbers of people who have been killed. But in the end a diplomatic settlement in Syria will require regional accommodation with Russia, so we are trying to construct a policy that allows us to reach a settlement that will satisfy all the different players, including Russia. There is a natural limit to levels of Russian ambition in the region, in that many countries in the region have deep historical suspicions of the Russians. Iran has its own tensions with Russia, which was the historical aggressor. We were competitors with Iran for a long time. Russia does not have much of a positive vision to offer beyond hard power—it does not have any soft power. It is a new fact of life and, to go back to the phone call question, we have to call Moscow more often about events in the Middle East than we used to.

I will say something very general about funds—Nick is the expert. There are a number of new funds in the Foreign Office, some of which were set up when he was there. The Conflict Fund morphed into the CSSF, which is the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, which was largely a by-product of Libya, when Ministers were frustrated that Whitehall could not move money quickly enough to do upstream stabilisation in risky environments. The CSSF is worth £1 billion across the world. In the Middle East, we spend £165 million annually—for example, in Syria, Libya, Lebanon and Jordan. We can give you some examples. On top of that, the Arab development fund was designed to deal with the longer-term causes of the Arab spring—the failures of economic and political governance. So we have looked again at that. Last year, we secured agreement through our comprehensive spending settlement to a north Africa good governance fund, which means £20 million this year, £40 million the next year and £60 million the year afterwards. It is designed to promote civil society, sustainable political institutions and economic reforms in ways in which the UK has been historically good. It is modelled a little bit on what we did in central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We have joined forces with DfID on that; in the Foreign Office we have a JCPOA¹ north Africa unit with FCO and DfID personnel, so we can combine our diplomatic skills with their sense of how to run longer-term programmes and development issues, as well as their economic savviness. There are two slightly different streams of work.

¹ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or the Iran Nuclear Agreement)

Nicholas Abbott: The CSSF grew out of the Conflict Pool, which was very much focused on FCO, DfID and MoD, and very much on a bilateral, country basis. The change in the CSSF has been to create a much more cross-Whitehall fund, which brings together all those who are working on the Middle East, or interested in working on the Middle East, around National Security Council strategies. That has driven a very different approach to our programming in the region. It has allowed a lot more interaction across Whitehall in defining what it is we are trying to do—but then also actually doing it. We have tried, particularly in the MENA region, to have our teams looking at conflict. So it is not just about saying that we have a country programme and this is the piece of the cake that we want this year; it is much more about asking what we can achieve in the Syria conflict and whether that will be in Jordan, southern Turkey or Syria itself, in Lebanon or Iraq. That has been a big change, and it changes the way in which the teams work and are constructed, and the people who are working in them.

We have more cross-Whitehall programme teams now than ever before. And, as you say, we are really only into the second year. We are seeing greater impact than we have had before. You will have heard of some of the programmes, including the work we have done with the Lebanese border force on strengthening the border between Lebanon and Syria to prevent Daesh and others from entering the country. We are working on civil defence with civil society in Syria, not only giving the White Helmets the capacity to respond but, in doing so, supporting a moderate opposition. The White Helmets are effectively doing more than just rescuing people, important though that is. We are also using CSSF in the Libya conflict, for instance, to look at not just practical things like demining and supporting civil society but also at how to provide UK expertise and advice to others, whether that is UN operations, EU operations or the Libyan Presidency Council. We have had advisers working with them over the last year.

Q22 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** I would like to hear your view on the progress of the Iran deal. Obviously there is nervousness about this in both Tehran and Washington, and it would be interesting to hear from your point of view how you think it is going. Is it naive to think that this might open the doors to wider co-operation between Iran and the West more broadly, or is the challenge at the moment just to keep the show on the road for the existing deal? How much is this damaging our relationship with Saudi and other states, which obviously are very nervous about some sort of rapprochement with Iran?

Neil Crompton: Self-evidently, we are strong supporters of the deal. We worked hard for it. It is often talked of as a US/Iran deal, but the E3² started the process back in 2004. It was a decade in the making and we think it is significant—in fact, one of the more significant pieces of international diplomacy in recent years. On the nuclear deal itself, the agreement is holding well. In January it will be a year since we signed the

² France, Germany and the United Kingdom

formal agreement. Iran is honouring its commitments. It has had two clean bills of health from the IAEA,³ with an unprecedented level of inspection. Iran has now signed and ratified the additional protocol. We see no evidence of cheating, and we continue to monitor that extremely closely. There is no nuclear dividend for our intelligence services, for example. We are operating on the principle of “trust but verify”, as with all nuclear agreements. I have dealt with Iran for many years, and an important part of the agreement was that this is effectively the first agreement in which the US and Iran have been involved in serious negotiations since the revolution apart from the negotiation back in 1980 over hostages. Both capitals have crossed a psychological threshold in agreeing this, and we expect that they will both want to honour the agreement. There is an election next week so that may change, but we at least are planning continuity of policy.

On your broader question, we think this is an opportunity to begin the process of bringing Iran back into the international community. Iran is probably the most complicated country in the region. It is not a democracy, as we know, but a pluralistic system of government and an open society that is evolving. We do not know at what pace it will move to a more normal system of government, but it is evolving in ways that make it more amenable for us to deal with. We have experience of working with the current executive leadership—Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif—on foreign policy issues. I was in Tehran during the President Khatami era, which was the high point of Iranian/Western co-operation; there was a serious dialogue about Afghanistan, an important dialogue over Iraq and co-operation in other areas. We think it will be a long-term process. There will be bumps on the road, and some of it will depend on how Washington acts. However, we hope that whoever the next US President is will feel that this is an agreement they should stick with and try to move forward and work with that natural process of change.

In answer to your question, our partners in the region—the Saudis, the Gulf states and Israel—do not like the agreement. The Gulf states at least are publicly supportive but privately they worry that essentially we have moved from a policy of containment to one of trying to draw Iran back into the international community. They are making their adjustments. We are emphasising to them that our commitment to their security is as it was before, and we have a beefed-up UK effort through the Gulf strategy to ensure that. Over time, they will make their own accommodations. At the moment there is a period of great tension, as Lord Hannay said, but they will find their own way of talking to each other, and it is in our interests to foster that. There is a tension there, and we have to manage it.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Could you tell us what you will do if you come into the office on 9 November to discover there is a President-elect in the United States who says he is going to junk the whole deal? What

³ International Atomic Energy Agency

advice would you be likely to give the Foreign Secretary, and what position do you think the French and the Germans, and indeed the Russians and Chinese, would take in those circumstances, which would be quite difficult to handle? Secondly, I ask you to speculate on the following. Fifteen years, which is the duration of the agreement, is not a very long time. I think it is clear that there would be great tensions if the agreement came to an end with nothing to replace it. Is it not time to be thinking about ways of mobilising and generalising some of the provisions of the Iran agreement—for example, on the prohibition on the enrichment above nuclear generation percentage—which could then make it more palatable to the Iranians in the long term? Are we giving any thought to that?

Neil Crompton: My advice to the Foreign Secretary would be that we should argue strongly that we should stick with the agreement. This was not a US-Iran agreement; it was an agreement between Iran and the E3+3 (Russia, China and the United States), and we would want to honour our part of the agreement. We would argue that vigorously to a new US President, and I think we would be in good company. I do not actually think it is a likely scenario, but you are right to ask the question. It may indeed be that there is some questioning of elements of the agreement by a new US Administration. An important part of what we have been doing with the Obama Administration, and what we will do with the new US Administration, is to emphasise that our part of the bargain, in the sense of the E3+3, was to ensure that Iran can enjoy the benefits of sanctions being lifted so that President Rouhani and others can say, "This agreement is meeting the interests of both sides". We will continue to do that.

On your second question, you are right: 15 years is not that long, for those of you who have dealt with disarmament issues for much longer than I have. We need to take a long-term perspective. A moderate amount of thought has gone on this. We are still in year 1 of policing the JCPOA, but we need to give thought to what our long-term relationship is with Iran. There is a technical dimension to that as well as a political one. Fifteen years will be a long time in Iran's political development. The age of the current post-revolution leadership, for example, suggests that it may be in a very different condition then. We need to try to manage that geopolitical dimension with the technical dimension. Although it is not my area of expertise, what you suggest—globalising some of these new standards—is eminently sensible.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Chairman, it might just be me, but could I respectfully ask our guest to increase the decibel level just a little for this end of the table? I would not want to miss anything.

The Chairman: We shall move on to the Gulf side of this. In everything you have said so far we are running two horses. Far from "not much liking" the Iran deal, in your words, the people in the Gulf, particularly at the southern end, hate and fear it and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, are directly and actively involved in a proxy war against Iran and its own

surrogates. I will ask you to illuminate that. First, I will ask Lady Hilton to lead on the whole question of your Gulf strategy.

Q23 Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: I had a holiday in Iran this year. It prides itself very much on being the one stable country in the region, which is impressive. The defence and security review last year promised a Gulf strategy. Are you any closer to developing a Gulf strategy in that fluid situation?

Neil Crompton: I think we are. There have been a series of Gulf initiatives over the years. I cannot quite remember when the first one was.

The Chairman: In 2011.

Neil Crompton: Yes, 2011. The initiatives sought to manage our relationships with individual Gulf states in a more systematic way and to ensure a regular stream of high-level political visitors to each of them in a way that promoted our interests. So you are right that in the SDSR⁴ there was a government commitment to a Gulf strategy. I do not think there is a plan to publish it as such; it is essentially building on what we have done before.

There is a security component to that. When we talk about our relationships with the Gulf states, government to government, it is like a three-legged stool. At the top level are political contacts, with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and others working with the rulers of the region. Then there are defence relationships, which are very deep and embedded. Then there are the other security relationships, including intelligence relationships, which are very important to them and indeed to us. We work on all those three in parallel.

There is a people-to-people dimension to the Gulf strategy as well. There are 150,000 Britons living in Dubai and enormous flows of people both ways. We find that when the government-to-government relationship works better, the soft-power, people-to-people relationships work better. So it is about trying to make a more systematic investment in both aspects of those relationships in ways that are mutually beneficial to the people of the region.

We have an agreed strategy. The Foreign Secretary plans to visit the Gulf later this year. We are hoping that the Prime Minister will visit at some point, which will be a bit of a launching pad for what you have termed the Gulf strategy. For us, it is a continuation of what we have been doing but with a heightened and improved level of investment and cross-Whitehall co-ordination.

The Chairman: On my analogy of riding two horses, in the southern Gulf, of course, we want to keep in with our UAE friends and Qatari friends and so on. They are still vital in the world of energy, although that

⁴ The Strategic Defence and Security Review

could be changing. But they are deeply hostile to and very fearful of Iran—they have been for a long time and are getting more so. Yet here we are pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran. This is real divergence, is it not? How are we bridging the gap?

Neil Crompton: There is a tension there, and the way we bridge the tension is partly by being transparent. At every stage of what was a decade-long nuclear negotiation with the Iranians, we have kept our partners in the region informed. In the case of the Israelis, there has been a period of unprecedented transparency in our relationship with them.

Secondly, there is a reassurance part of what we are trying to do with the Gulf states. They are worried that in a sense we are shifting horses rather than trying to ride two horses. That is not the case. We have fundamental, deep-rooted interests on the Arab side of the Gulf and we want to strengthen them. Strengthening defence and intelligence relationships is an important part of that.

Reassurance also comes from helping them deal with those aspects of Iranian foreign policy that we find objectionable: in particular, Iran's support for militias and proxies. We and the Gulf states are very closely aligned on policy in Syria, where we are on the opposite side of the argument to the Iranians. In the case of Yemen, the conflict in Yemen has many dimensions, but there is an Iranian dimension. We continue to give a lot of political, diplomatic and military support to the coalition in the Gulf to try to resolve the conflict there in a way that will satisfy their security concerns. We want to get over to them that we see an opportunity in the case of Iran. In the long term, that will be an opportunity for them, because it will reduce a major fault line across the region. In the short term, the task is to reassure them that we are not hedging and riding two horses; we are trying to advance everyone's interests.

The Chairman: In Bahrain, which is very anti-Iran, we are building a naval base.

Neil Crompton: That is part of the overall commitment to security in the region.

Baroness Helic: I have a quick question. As we give this political, diplomatic and military support to our Gulf allies, who I know are very important in the overall scheme of things in the region and beyond, how do we feel when we see people starving and hospitals being bombed, with no humanitarian access to camps where people do not have food? We have seen reports of this and we know that these are our allies. Do we ever advise them or help them or ask them to do things or suggest to them that they should open humanitarian corridors and let in the UNHCR or Médecins Sans Frontières or anyone else? How does that sit with our overall foreign policy?

Neil Crompton: Of course, in the case of Yemen we are deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation. We are a major donor there. We have been involved in a very intense dialogue through different channels with the Saudis and other members of the coalition since the intervention. . For example, on the military front we have offered enormous levels of training to help them ensure that their processes are compatible, for example, with NATO. So aspects of international humanitarian law are probably factored into the targeting processes. There are also processes for investigating accidents that have happened. So there have been big improvements in those areas.

On the humanitarian situation, we have worked very closely with the Gulf states. They are major contributors of aid to Yemen through UN agencies. I recall, earlier this year, when Philip Hammond was still Foreign Secretary, long conversations about, for example, how the coalition could continue to operate a blockade to stop the flow of weapons while allowing in humanitarian assistance. That is a continuous dialogue. We are all conscious of the public concern about this. Ministers share that with you. It is a very challenging situation.

We are also conscious that the cause of the conflict was the overthrow of a legitimate Government in Sanaa. The Houthis and their Ali Abdullah Saleh allies are engaged in very provocative acts. There are cross-border raids every day. Earlier this week, the Houthis fired Scud missiles towards Jeddah international airport. There have been three Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea in the past few weeks. So this is a hot conflict that we are trying to resolve diplomatically. The Foreign Secretary has hosted three meetings of what we call the quadrilateral group of Foreign Ministers—with John Kerry, the Saudi Foreign Minister and the UAE Foreign Minister—in the past three months. He hosted one in his first week and we had a fourth meeting in Jeddah—so it is a very intensive burst of activity to try to reach a diplomatic settlement that will allow for a durable settlement in Yemen and allow alleviation of the humanitarian situation.

The Chairman: Is Iran involved in that diplomatic effort or is it standing behind the Houthis?

Neil Crompton: Iran has provided weapons and training to the Houthis.

The Chairman: Sorry, you said that you were trying to provide a diplomatic solution.

Neil Crompton: We are trying to find a diplomatic solution. We have spoken to the Iranians, but they are not central to this.

The Chairman: The Saudis have said that they are not going to stand for it, whatever we do. They are furious.

Neil Crompton: We think that Iranian activity in Yemen has been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. But we have a dialogue with the Iranians; we talk to them in general terms about Yemen. But the

Iranian provision of weaponry to the Houthis has not been helpful and has been seen as a threat by the Gulf states.

The Chairman: Can we move on to Daesh and Lord Jopling?

Q24 **Baroness Hilton of Eggardon:** I am sorry, but I have not had my second question, which relates very much to what you have been talking about—Saudi Arabia and Yemen. We have been criticised for selling arms to Saudi Arabia, which have been used in attacking people in Yemen, which is theoretically contrary to our arms policy. That is an anxiety. The other place with which we have traditionally had very good relationships is Turkey, but Turkey is increasingly drifting more towards Islamic State. In an age of modern communications, and so on, it may be less stable than it appears, in view of the current crackdown by Erdogan. Do you feel that both our traditional partners in that part of the world should be seen as stable, and should we continue to have our commercial interests with them both?

Neil Crompton: I am not responsible for Turkey, but I hope that I can give an intelligent answer to your question.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: It is very much part of the region.

Neil Crompton: Quite. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the minor tectonic plates of the region and, historically, they have been important UK partners in the region. Saudi Arabia, and indeed the Gulf states, partly as a consequence of new leaderships coming through, want to play a more ambitious role in the region. We have been encouraging them for years to take more responsibility for resolving security problems in their own back yard, which is what they say they are trying to do in Yemen. We have supported the intervention, which was blessed by a UN Security Council resolution. We are all very conscious of the public concern about arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but that is scrutinised very closely. I have a team which works almost 24/7 in analysing incidents of concern and reporting to Ministers, who scrutinise them through a formal review process. We can give you chapter and verse on this one. That is to ensure that we are meeting our obligations. So far, Ministers have concluded that we are in compliance. But that forms part of our dialogue at the top political level with Saudi Arabia.

With Turkey, I am not well placed to comment on its long-term direction of travel, but as the regional director for the Middle East I find myself talking to the Turks much more than I did 10 or 15 years ago, because they have become much more active in many different theatres—particularly since the Arab spring, when Erdogan thought that his AKP model would be a good fit for countries in the region. That has produced some tensions. But on Iraq and the fight against Daesh and on Syria they are absolutely critical partners to us. We are pleased that Turkey has made efforts to improve relations with Israel, which was historically an important source of stability in the region. Although occasionally we have differences with the Turks over many things, on issues such as migration,

Syria, Iraq and Daesh we find them crucial partners. I am not quite sure how we would get work done without them.

The Chairman: They used to be considered to be firmly in the western camp, and that was it—part of NATO, and no argument. But presumably you are getting rather a different tone in the dialogue that you have with them.

Neil Crompton: They are still NATO allies and key western partners. I am not responsible for Turkey, so I would hesitate to say anything on the record. But Turkey is evolving.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: But Kurdish ambitions in the area are surely part of your concerns—and that is profoundly affecting how Turkey is behaving.

Neil Crompton: In similar terms, all the regional powers, or at least the ones with Iraq, have a Kurdish dimension. Turkey, Iran and Baghdad all worry about Kurdish ambitions. What is striking for me is the extent to which under President Erdogan Turkish-Iraqi-Kurdish relations have improved significantly over the past five or 10 years. That predated the Daesh problem. Masoud Barzani is a regular and well-received visitor in Ankara in a way that would have been inconceivable 15 years ago. There is a strong international view that the Kurds should enjoy good autonomous governing arrangements within existing borders, and Turkey, Iran and other players are comfortable with that.

Tom Pravda: We may come on to Iraq and Daesh—but when we look at Turkish relations with the Kurds, what is striking is Turkey's relationship with the Iraqi Kurds. It hints at the complexity of the Kurdish issue. It is easy to see the ambition for a grand, independent Kurdish state straddling borders, but of course when you get into Kurdish politics you see great divisions among different Kurdish groups. Turkey's relationship with the Barzanis and the Iraqi Kurds is an illustration of how you can get what look like great enemies working very constructively together.

The Chairman: There is much more to discuss on all these matters, but let us move to Lord Jopling's question on Iraq and Daesh.

Q25 **Lord Jopling:** It is probably appropriate to ask this question on a day when Iraqi and Kurdish troops have entered Mosul, which looks like a battle that will take quite a long time. Have we learned any lessons from the past? What preparations have we made to deal with a post-military phase, assuming that we get there, in reconstructing the city of Mosul and the areas surrounding it that are not under the control of the Iraqi Government? Have we learned the lessons of the past, or are we stumbling into a new chaos after the military phase? You will remember that Chilcot was devastating in its criticisms of the Americans and the British, who failed to raise this in the days before the second Iraq war. I do not want to sound too smug, but I disassociated myself on the record from the Government of the day and my own Front Bench in opposing that war because of the lack of preparation and thought given to the

post-military phase. The whole thing was a disgrace, quite frankly. Has anything serious been done to prepare for the post-military phase in this part of Iraq, or are we going to trudge on into increasing chaos?

Neil Crompton: I hope that I can reassure you that a lot of lessons have been learned. Some of us were involved with Iraq in 2003, and we have scars on our back to go with it. A lot of the lessons that Chilcot advocates had been learned within government already. There have been structural changes to government, with the creation of the National Security Council. In the Foreign Office, working with DfID, we have a stabilisation unit, with a group of people who think deeply about day-after stabilisation issues in conflict situations. The need for proper planning is ingrained in all our individual psyches.

In the case of Mosul, we are in a different context from 2003, in that then we were the invaders and the occupying power. This time we are working in support of an Iraqi operation, as part of a coalition. That comes with particular complications. What I can say is that an enormous amount of thought has gone into Mosul, by which I mean it has gone into stabilisation generally. Tom is really the expert and can give you some detail, but there are three or four different strands to that. One is to ensure that Iraqis have thought about the politics for the day after Mosul is recaptured. Daesh emerged in a situation of sectarian politics in Iraq that had alienated the Sunni community. From the outset of the coalition intervention in Iraq, we have stressed that the Iraqis need a politically led solution to dealing with Daesh. There is a military component as well, but in the end they will need to resolve the underlying political problem. We have made some progress on that but there is a lot more to be done.

At the level of Mosul, that involves pushing the Iraqis very hard to try to ensure that there is a governance arrangement in Iraq the day after which will enjoy the legitimacy of the residents of Mosul, as well as satisfying the different ethnic communities of Iraq that we are not trying to redraw borders. There is a humanitarian dimension to that, and the UN has the lead on the humanitarian operation. DfID is the natural lead in Whitehall. There has been a huge logistical operation to ensure that we can deal with displaced people as and when they leave Mosul in large numbers. There is also recognition, particularly with the oil price having fallen by 50%, that Iraq will need financial help, so earlier this year the G7 identified £3.6 billion of funds to help with reconstruction costs in Iraq as and when Mosul falls.

Tom Pravda: Just to complement what Neil said, you can see that the whole counter-Daesh campaign and this phase of it are Iraqi-led. That does not just mean the troops on the ground; it is in terms of all these questions around planning for the day after, the stabilisation effort and the politics, as Neil focused on. If it is useful, we can dwell on the extent to which that is the lesson learned by us and the Americans about how to get that long-term stability—the requirement for that local leadership and ownership of it.

To complement Neil's point, there are phases to this. The question of what is going to happen the day after Mosul has fallen has been absolutely top of the UK's agenda, going well back into last year and certainly all this year, during which there has been intensive planning around the operation. Of course we are deeply involved in the mechanics of the planning of the military operation, but again the top question has been, "Right, what is going to happen the day after?" What we have put in place to try to address the concerns that you have raised here, and which we are well aware that others have raised, include the things that are done during the operation. We have all understood, and the Iraqis absolutely understand, that the way this operation is carried out will be critical to what happens the day after. The question of which forces are going to be involved in the operation and who will enter the city of Mosul—Iraqi security forces rather than a Shia militia or Kurdish forces—is fully recognised by the Iraqis as critical to the effect that it will have on community relations and the chances for stability being restored soon after. Along with the question of how it is carried out with personnel, there is the actual conduct of the battle. The extent to which the city of Mosul is damaged—its housing and infrastructure—is going to create a huge question of reconstruction costs as well as, again, community relations and the effect that it has on the politics if that city is devastated and livelihoods are destroyed. There is strong recognition by the Iraqis that that will have huge implications. Getting the conduct of the operation right is a huge focus for them, and for us and coalition partners in working with them to support that.

Then there is the humanitarian effort, which Neil has touched on, which again is happening now. The UN is leading that. We announced another £40 million, meaning we are giving a total of £170 million to the humanitarian effort in Iraq. The support we provide to civilians as they come out of Mosul and the Nineveh plain is in place right now, and again is understood to be critical to how those people are going to be able to go back home and rebuild their lives.

Then there is what I would characterise as the short-term to medium-term planning, which is focused on stabilisation, as Neil touched on. We are contributing more than £15 million to the large pool of funding that the UN is overseeing with the Iraqis. Our money is focused particularly on clearing explosive devices from the city of Mosul, rebuilding water and power infrastructure, health facilities and schools. That is mirrored across the whole stabilisation effort. So money is being put in there, including by the UK, and plans are in place to ensure that Mosul can be brought back up to a liveable state as quickly as possible to allow people to return—again, importantly, because that will underpin the prospects for stability and community relations in the city afterwards.

Then there is the longer-term question, which Neil touched on, of ensuring that Iraq has the resources at a macro level to underpin reconstruction in Mosul and other parts of Iraq as well as to give the government the sort of financial stability they need to build towards what we know as the toughest part of all this: what is often termed the

political reconciliation, the future vision for Iraq. We know that there are these big questions around national reconciliation. Some of that is between Arab Iraq and Kurdish Iraq. The other piece of course is between the Sunni and Shia sections of the population, which remains to some extent a massive work in progress since 2003. Political focus has gone into the Mosul planning around ensuring that people have political understanding of who is going to be in charge the day after, and where. We have also put in a conscious effort with the Americans and the Iraqis themselves to try to use that as a bridge into these longer-term national reconciliation questions. One of the first questions that will come up will be the borders between Arab Iraq and Kurdistan. We know that there are forces now on the ground moving into the disputed territories. There is certainly no complacency about the risks there; it is at the top of the agenda for the Iraqis, encouraged and supported by us and by the US.

The Chairman: That sounds very constructive.

Lord Jopling: Is everything possible being done to inform the citizens who remain in Mosul and who are not connected to Daesh that there are optimistic prospects ahead? If the people realise that, are they not likely to make life as difficult as they can for the Daesh people who are trying to hold the city?

Tom Pravda: Yes, absolutely. This is in the category that we have had with the Iraqis of how the operation is carried out, and a critical part of that is the communications going on now. We have been working with the Iraqis to build that in place throughout this calendar year. We as the UK have played quite a big role in the communications effort; we have provided expert support to the Government of Iraq on this, as well as hosting on behalf of the Coalition what is called the Coalition Communications Cell, providing wider communications around the counter-Daesh campaign. Specifically on Mosul, the key messages from the Iraqi Government—again, it really has been the Government in Baghdad who have been leading these messages, and Abadi has been very involved personally—have been: “We are coming with a future vision for Mosul that is part of a more stable and inclusive Iraq, and a force is on the ground to liberate the city from Daesh”. We are conscious that Daesh is running an intensive counter-propaganda effort; it is distributing material all the time around Mosul saying, “The Shia, the Iranians and the Kurds are coming to get you”. We are conscious that this is a very contested space but, through the Government of Iraq and by providing support to them, we are contesting that quite intensively, including down to logistical and practical suggestions around encouraging people to stay in the city or, if they are going to move out, where they can go to, working out where humanitarian support is going to be provided in terms of locations.

The Iraqis have been very conscious, and we have tried to help them to focus on this, to publicise what happened in Anbar, Tikrit and elsewhere in Iraq when Daesh was driven out. You can communicate all you like and be contested on how credible this is. The most credible thing the Iraqis

can do, and they have been doing it, is to point the people in Mosul to what has happened in Tikrit, for example, where after Daesh was driven out about 90% of the population returned. Actually, life has returned in many ways to quite a good degree in terms of both prosperity and community stability. I would point again at the stabilisation and reconstruction process going on in Anbar. We have helped them to try to test this. That is hard—we do not have focus groups in Mosul at this point—but we have good indications that some of these messages of the communications strategy that the Iraqi Government are running are landing with the people in Mosul. It will be contested, as you said, with Daesh running strongly in the other direction.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Can you explain why, whenever it is raised in Parliament that *prima facie* the evidence is that Daesh's activities in Iraq and Syria have been war crimes and, in the treatment of Yazidis and Christians, have amounted to genocide, the Foreign Office response is invariably that "That will be a matter for the court to decide"—which of course is a bit of a bad joke since neither of those countries accepts the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court? Why are you not able to say that *prima facie*—I am not asking for a judgment—these crimes have been committed? When the Foreign Secretary then pops up and says that bombing Aleppo was a war crime, on which I totally agree with him, it seems to be a bit inconsistent to denounce a war crime in Aleppo in Syria but to refuse to say anything about a war crime that has been going on all the time for the past two years in eastern Syria and Iraq.

Tom Pravda: On the question about Daesh crimes, as you know, the Government's position is, as you put it—and it is a long-standing one—that a determination of whether any particular crime has taken place, whether genocide or a war crime, is a matter for the appropriate legal authorities, not a political judgment to make. However, and I may get the exact phrasing wrong, earlier this year in the House David Cameron expressed the Government's view of what has been happening, which is along the lines that—excuse the exact language—there is a very strong case here to answer for Daesh's behaviour, specifically against Yazidis, Christians and other minority groups on the question of genocide.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Why can you not say that in our view there is a *prima facie* case to answer? I am not contesting the view that a determination will be made in the court, but why can we not say that? If the Foreign Secretary can say that *prima facie* a war crime is being committed in Aleppo, why can we not say that about the Yazidis and the behaviour in eastern Syria and Iraq?

Neil Crompton: I think we will have to take that away, Lord Hannay. All these questions are involved with layers of theology that I confess I do not properly understand.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Perhaps if the question is asked in the House, you will get a better answer.

The Chairman: I think we will leave that.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: I believe there is a Question on this issue from Lord Alton on 22 November.

The Chairman: Obviously this is a very unresolved area and one that is difficult to clarify. I ask Lord Reid to take us to the area of who should we be allowing, and who is fighting whom.

Q26 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** I will comment on the last point. The case for the defence might be that Daesh is not a state and therefore not subject to stringent regulations that apply to states. That could be the Foreign Secretary's explanation. There is an obvious contradiction, as Lord Hannay said, between the preparedness to accuse Russia, Assad and the Syrian state of war crimes and the reluctance even to use that language about Daesh.

I want to talk about the level beneath the state. We have already touched upon non-state and sub-state actors. I want to deal not with non-state or transnational actors such as Daesh but with the increasing importance of the development of units that are geographical, sometimes ethnic and sometimes historical, within a given state in terms of political power. I am not suggesting that this is applicable only to the Middle East; we have seen this in the Walloon Parliament in Belgium recently, and indeed in the relationship of our own Parliament here with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. It immensely complicates matters, does it not? I do not just mean the Kurdistan Regional Government: in Lebanon we have the emergence of actors there; in Libya there are two Governments; in Syria we are seeing the potential development of sub-state actors, depending on how that conflict plays out; and indeed Iraq itself, if I recall correctly, was formed by merging together with lines on a map the Ottoman Governates of Kirkuk, Basra and Baghdad, and to some extent we are seeing them develop again. It must be getting very complicated, not only to have to phone more capitals but to have to maintain a relationship with those sub-state actors that are powerful instruments of change in the area. I wonder whether the UK is sufficiently calibrating its engagement accordingly. If so, has it fostered adequate links with sub-state actors, and how critical do you think they are to achieving the security and stability objectives in the region?

Neil Crompton: That is a fascinating question. I agree with the way that you characterise the challenge. It has become much more complicated since the Arab spring because in many different contexts we cannot simply have a conversation with a capital any more. I am speaking for the FCO but this will also apply to other bits of the Government, whether our intelligence colleagues or our defence colleagues: as a general rule diplomats think we should talk to as many people as possible within the day. In Iraq we have always tried to maintain a close relationship with central government but we have also tried to talk to the different communities and leaders of different political parties and to maintain relationships with regional governors, either because they are important national figures in their own right or because they are doing important things that can contribute to our longer-term interests in Iraq.

It has become much more complicated in recent years. In Syria, for example, we are trying to maintain a close political dialogue with the Syrian opposition. There are myriad different groups. They have political offices in Istanbul, which are relatively easy to access. We believe that those figures in Istanbul are representative, but they in turn have to manage relationships with armed groups on the ground that for obvious reasons are much harder for us to access. In post-conflict situations such as in Libya, we are having to deal with a range of different actors as we make efforts to form a cohesive central Government. That involves talking to different faction leaders and sometimes different militia leaders and the like. This is inherently complex and poses immense challenges to us. It puts a premium on language skills. It is no longer enough for one person in an embassy to speak the language well; now most people have to speak it well. Very often there are security constraints on doing this and the provision of security for anyone, particularly the civilians, is enormously expensive and time-consuming. That poses a natural constraint on the extent to which we can get out there, but we work very hard at that and try to get around as much as we can.

The way you characterise it, Lord Reid, is right; we have a much more complicated world. I think we are doing quite well at this but there is room for improvement. We will be very interested in your conclusions.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: May I ask a quick follow-up question? Very bluntly—and I do not blame you for this—you are saying, and we all understand this, that the number of state actors that we now have to deal with, the number of sub-state actors that you will have to deal with and the number of non-state actors that you may or may not be able to enter dialogue with have all increased, yet over the past period the Foreign Office budget has been slashed, and I suspect there will be another raid on Foreign Office resources by the three musketeers who are in charge of Brexit. So at a time of exponentially increasing demands on your human and financial resources, the resources to tackle this are being decreased. Does this worry you, or would you rather hold your counsel in view of your career prospects?

Neil Crompton: I think you have answered your own question very well.

The Chairman: This really is a big issue that we are going to come back to again and again, and Lord Reid was right to identify it. Can we ask Mr Abbott to comment on the immediate problem of dealing with all these disparate groups?

Nicholas Abbott: The way in which the FCO has moved into doing programmes and programme management in the region, and the amount of money that we have available that we did not before, means that we have more contact with these groups. When we are looking at the programmes that people are doing, it is not just about them having Government-to-Government memorandums on capacity-building; it is also about looking at how they are understanding the real issues, the dynamics of the conflicts and how much our programmes are addressing those. The one that comes to mind is Tunisia, the one country that came

out of the Arab spring that remains a democracy and is seen as a beacon. How do we protect that? What are the issues in Tunisia? It is not just about security sector reform with the Ministry of Interior; it is also about looking at those areas of the country that do not see development and are losing out in the social contract. What can we do, often with others, to reinforce and change that? In some ways the economic picture has become more difficult, but at the same time we have new tools that allow us to do things differently that we would not have done 10 or 15 years ago.

The Chairman: This takes us on to Lord Inglewood's question about what we are after and what different kinds of power are used to achieve our aims, whatever they may be.

Q27 **Lord Inglewood:** You talked at the beginning of the meeting about a networked world. I am interested to know what sort of tools, for what in the context is now known by everyone as soft power, the Government are using and finding efficient in promoting their vision and values, and thereby winning hearts and minds among the people of the Middle East. In parenthesis, one of my daughters is at university in Istanbul. Within hours of the failed coup, she received a personal email from President Erdogan encouraging her to go out on to the streets to demonstrate. Clearly there is a mechanism to take things directly to people.

Neil Crompton: I see we have some way to go. I will start by looking at what the UK's comparative advantages are. In the Middle East, we have enormous soft-power advantages. Our history of involvement there is a bit of a double-edged sword; this year is a year of anniversaries—there is Sykes-Picot, and today is the 99th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. I often have conversations with people who assume that I can talk with great familiarity about the triangle situation in northern Morocco. I wish I could. There is a great belief that we understand the region better than others. At a political level, that is great.

At the people-to-people level, I will run off a list of the advantages. People are very familiar with the UK. London is an enormously attractive destination for people from the region, whether just for tourism—as you will see if you go to Edgware Road on August nights—to see the Shard and the Emirates Stadium, or as a hugely attractive investment destination, with extraordinary sums of our money in London for the last 50 years. There is the English language itself, and the British education system—from the Gulf alone there are 20,000 students in the UK, with 16,000 more at British-affiliated universities in the region. There is the BBC and the British Council. I think we have realised over the last year that the diversity of our society is enormously attractive. There was a golden period earlier this year in the spring, just after Sadiq Khan was elected Mayor of London and Leicester City was about to win the Premiership with Mr Mahrez, an Algerian striker, when we were front-page news across the Arab world: "Look at the way UK society is so diverse that people can flourish in this way". We find that even in parts of the region like North Africa, which traditionally we have regarded as a French area of influence, there is a desire for a bit more of an Anglo-

Saxon model. They look at the UK and the United States and think, "Things work there", and there is a desire to get closer to us. So we start with a set of strengths, and in our diplomacy we are trying to bolt modern tools on to this. A core function of our ambassadors' role now is to communicate through social media with the local population, where perhaps 30 years ago they would have seen their sole job as communicating with the Director Middle East in the office. We are thinking creatively about how we can harness these different soft-power tools to maximise our influence, but we start from quite a high base. I am not sure we are yet where President Erdogan is, though.

Lord Inglewood: I do not necessarily want us to get everywhere. Do you think it is working? You can communicate as much as you like but you have to get the message across.

Neil Crompton: It depends. What do you think we are trying to sell?

Lord Inglewood: Our values. Our perspectives.

The Chairman: That is the question we want to ask you.

Neil Crompton: It works in the sense that Britain is seen as a country that is heavily engaged in the region and wants to make it better, and that the UK is a part of the world that people want to visit.

Lord Inglewood: Are we perceived as wanting to make it better for them as well as for us?

Neil Crompton: That is a good question. I believe that in large parts the answer is yes but that comes with a degree of suspicion about motives, which is not a problem that is unique to the Middle East but is generic across the board.

The Chairman: What about arms suppliers? Does that fit in with our soft-power aims?

Neil Crompton: I half-answered your question before: I think they complement it. With most of these states, the Government-to-Government relationship, which includes a defence relationship as well as an intelligence relationship, is very important to them. That is particularly true in the Gulf states where traditionally the UK, the United States and, to a lesser extent, France have been the guarantors of security, whether that be in the first Gulf War or, more recently, in terms of reassurance vis-à-vis Iran. When the Government-to-Government relationship is strong, particularly in countries where large percentages of their gross domestic product comes from oil revenues, the commercial relationship with countries and the people-to-people relationships tend to be stronger.

Q28 **Baroness Coussins:** You mentioned language skills in one of your earlier answers, and I think it is self-evident that language skills and the cultural understanding and sensitivity that goes with them are one of the most important soft-power tools. Yet there have been a number of different reports from parliamentary and non-parliamentary sources criticising the

Foreign Office for being weak on language skills, particularly in relation to a response that was not as effective as we might have expected to the unfolding of the Arab spring. The same kind of criticism was made of Russian speakers and what happened in Ukraine. This is despite the Foreign Office language school being reopened in 2013 and higher expectations of embassy staff, as you mentioned earlier. You talked about the importance of having people on the ground in the Middle East to help with post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, countering Daesh propaganda and so on, as well as the core skills of embassy staff. So what is your assessment of how the Foreign Office and our staff in the Middle East will be able to improve those language skills and front-line experience, and the cultural sensitivity that goes with them, in order to fulfil our policy expectations of them? As a student of Arabic myself, I know that one size does not fit all; you cannot just have Arabic, you have to have the right sort of Arabic. We are talking about different dialects and of course other important languages in the region, such as Farsi. Does the Foreign Office have the capacity to teach people and give them the experience on the ground of the right dialects—as the Defence Academy does, for example?

Neil Crompton: Sure. I welcome the question, and I recognise the challenge that you put down. I am sure the Committee has looked at this in a generic sense. Within the Civil Service and the Foreign Office there have been changes in fashion. When Lord Hannay was in the office, I suspect that the general level of language skill around the Foreign Office was higher. There was a period when other competences were stressed, and that came at the expense of language skills. I think the office recognised that some years ago, and William Hague played a very important part in stressing the rebuilding of expertise. We reopened the language centre, and my sense as the director overseeing a network is that we are doing better at this than we were five or 10 years ago.

I shall give you two or three examples. We have become much more rigorous now. If we advertise a job to be an ambassador in the Middle East, very often it is advertised two and a half years in advance so that if a non-Arabist wants to apply and gets the job they have 18 months to go away and study Arabic. We have examples of people coming in and studying Arabic later in their careers than perhaps they used to; they tended to do that as a second job in the Foreign Office and then stick with it during their career. We are doing this at all grades. When I go around the network I see some good examples of young officers who are very good Arabic, Persian or Hebrew speakers—indeed, good Kurdish speakers. It is a constant challenge. We have to keep it up and work hard to ensure that there is a career structure within which people can move. One of our challenges is that the Middle East is less safe than it was. Some 10 or 15 years ago a young single man or woman might do a conflict posting in Iraq, where they worked for six weeks in the posting and then took two weeks off. They were very happy to do that, but then if they marry and have children they do not necessarily want to be in that environment. The number of places where families can go safely has been much reduced.

The office as a whole is very conscious of the need to incentivise regional expertise within its promotion structures. You need to talk to the Permanent Under-Secretary, about this; he has overseen a big review of the way we do this. They call it Diplomacy 2020, and an emphasis on expertise is a big part of that. As the Director Middle East, I can say that our Permanent Under-Secretary is an excellent Arabist who has served twice in Riyadh and in Tel Aviv as well. We have made a lot of progress—but it is work in progress. We are trying to complement that. We in the Middle East Directorate run what we call a Middle East cadre with two or three different strands, one of which is ensuring that language students keep their languages up and have opportunities in the career structure to move around. We identify slots and help people to manage their careers so that they can go from, say, Baghdad to Washington to a Middle East job there, then perhaps go as a deputy head of mission to a north Africa post and then come back and head a department in London. We are also looking at ways in which we can develop the expertise of non-Middle East specialists when they come in. We are currently tendering with a couple of London universities to run a five-day comparative studies course on an introduction to the Middle East so that any desk officer can go and spend five days on a crash course—I am not sure yet which university it will be—on the history of the Middle East. There are a number of different initiatives in play, coupled with a broader policy of education that was institutionalised during William Hague's time in order to professionalise the Diplomatic Service again.

Baroness Coussins: Are you happy that the Foreign Office language services that you have described are open and actively seeking people from DfID and other relevant departments who you mentioned earlier you were working collaboratively with on the ground in the Middle East?

Nicholas Abbott: Yes, they are. Within our MENA cadre, we have invited those from other Whitehall departments who have an interest in or indeed experience of Arabic and health education to continue. They are involved in the classes that we run every week.

The Chairman: We have arrived at the question without which at the moment no discussion is complete. It is going to come from Baroness Smith.

Q29 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** I get the pleasure of asking the question that has been touched on in passing already: the impact of the UK's vote to leave the European Union. You talked earlier about the E3. Obviously the demarche in Tehran over nuclear was very much a trilateral basis—not directly because we were members of the EU, but nevertheless the key figures were all part of the EU. Do you envisage that there will be any significant changes in the UK's activities in the Middle East because of leaving the European Union, or do you see ways in which we might be able to continue relations with our European partners in such a way that we can play an influential role? To pick up on some of the points that you did not pick up earlier—you were sufficiently diplomatic not to answer Lord Reid's question—you have also talked

about incentivising people to be Arabists and so on. Is there a potential that if we need to increase the roles of our bilateral embassies in Western Europe in future, there will be a pull away from the Middle East for career diplomats?

Neil Crompton: My patch is arguably less affected by Brexit than others. The Gulf states, for example, are not particularly interested in the EU. They tried for a very long time to negotiate a free-trade agreement with the EU but failed. Their principal interest is in whether people can help them with their security, so although they look at Europe that really means the UK, France and Washington. They have invested hundreds of billions of dollars in London over the years because London is a good place for investment; it is not because they want to build car plants to export to the European market. They will make their own judgment and it will be based on the prospects for the EU. They are interested in the phenomenon and I think all the Gulf Foreign Ministers have said they want to sign a free-trade agreement with the UK as soon as we are allowed to pursue that. There will be some challenges, obviously. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, much of our role has been played through the quartet; we have been represented in the past by the EU and, at one remove, by Tony Blair. We do not yet know quite how that will work.

In the case of North Africa, where we are making a greater investment, we are very conscious—our North Africa Good Governance Fund found this—that it is modest compared with the amount of money that the EU spends across North Africa, so our ability to leverage that could be less than before. We have other levers, though: our relationships with the Gulf states and with the major foreign investors across north Africa through the G7. We still have our role on the Security Council and the other instruments of British influence that you will all be familiar with. For me, it probably feels like less of an impact than for some of my colleagues around the office. The Government see the Middle East as an area where the UK has comparative advantages and has punched above its weight, and they would like to continue that. Personally I do not see any reason why we should not; we call it the E3+3 but the Americans have always called it the P5+1. It is a rhetorical shift. My French colleague is quite clear with me that he sees that the most important and detailed dialogue at national level is with us. The French have important institutional relationships with Brussels and an important bilateral relationship with Germany, but many of those relationships will survive whatever arrangement we come up with for Brexit.

On whether I am worried that resources will go to Western Europe, I come back to Lord Reid's question about resourcing. We are in an era where people want us to do more and more and we have to prioritise, but that specific question is above my pay grade.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: To turn the Brexit question the other way around, you do not see any great opportunity in our leaving the EU that is going to transform our relationship with countries in the Middle East, as is sometimes suggested will be the effect worldwide?

Neil Crompton: There are opportunities. In a sense, we spend an awful lot of time negotiating EU positions that we do not always agree with. That consumes an enormous amount of time, as you would know better than I do, so not having meetings in Brussels will free up time. On some issues we may find it slightly liberating. There will be economic opportunities for us to pursue a free-trade agreement with the Gulf states and Israel as and when we are allowed to do so.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: But do they actually apply tariffs to us now? Are most of our exports subject to tariffs in the Gulf states?

Neil Crompton: Some. I would have to go away and find out; there is a piece of research going on that is looking at this in detail, and we could come back and report on it. However, there is the symbolic effect of a free-trade agreement.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: They do not export anything.

Neil Crompton: Lots of oil.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: But that is zero-rated.

Neil Crompton: I would like to see the research, because I am not quite sure what it says about investment and the like. Still, I think there will be lots of opportunities for us there. As I said, you may get a different answer from some of my other regional colleagues.

The Chairman: To be clear on Baroness Smith's question, we do not need to be in the EU to be in the quartet?

Neil Crompton: We are not in the quartet. That would be a challenge for us.

The Chairman: We are in the quartet as part of the EU, are we not?

Neil Crompton: Yes.

The Chairman: So can we carry on if we are not part of the EU?

Neil Crompton: We would not, without some special arrangement.

The Chairman: That would make it a quintet.

Neil Crompton: People often want us in the room because we add value.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: The quartet+1.

The Chairman: We have gone on much too long and, frankly, could spend hours more. All three of you are dealing with areas of unparalleled complexity that are changing incredibly fast to boot. We have learned a lot from your answers and are extremely grateful. Of course we have lots more questions for you, your colleagues and others in the coming months, but in the meantime thank you very much for your patience, wisdom and shared thoughts.