



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Wednesday 14 December 2016

10.00 am

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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 Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 72 – 100

Witnesses

I: Dr Ahmed Al Hamli, President, TRENDS Research & Advisory.

II: Mr Adrian Chadwick, Regional Director, Middle East and North Africa, British Council; Mr Oliver McTernan, Director, Forward Thinking; Mr Tarik Kafala, Controller, Language Services, BBC World Service; Mr Sam Farah, Head of Arabic Service, BBC World Service.

III: Rt Hon Jack Straw, former Foreign Secretary (2001-06), former shadow Deputy Prime Minister (2010), former MP (1979-2015).

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli.

Q72 **The Chairman:** Dr Al Hamli, good morning. Thank you very much for being with us. I am required formally to remind you that this is a public session that is on the record. A transcript will follow. If we have made mistakes or the transcript does not conform to what you thought you said and you want to change it that will be a possibility. Secondly, I should explain that our inquiry is aimed not so much at individual connections between the UK and particular major countries in the area from which you come, but at the general transformation of power, the redistribution of influence and power in the region, and what the implications are for the wider world and for ourselves in this country. That is our perspective.

Given that, may I begin with the key question about the Gulf States generally, of which the UAE is obviously one of the major ones? How would you say the Emiratis are placing themselves in this region of turmoil and internecine ethnic and religious conflict? What are your hopes for the aims in the future from the Emiratis' point of view? Give us your wisdom.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: I thank you for inviting me to take part in this important proceeding. The transformation of power is very important to the region and to the wider world. I emphasise that I appear as President of TRENDS Research & Advisory, an independent think tank based in Abu Dhabi. It covers a wide range of security issues facing the region and the wider world. My opinion does not represent any of the official Governments. I do not speak for or on behalf of any of the GCC¹ countries or Governments. My view is based on TRENDS' work and research.

If I understand the point of your question, it is about how the UAE sees the challenges the region faces. My understanding, according to research done by TRENDS, is that the UAE and the GCC are facing a significant challenge posed by Iran. The Iran challenge has multiple dimensions. I begin with nuclear activities and the nuclear deal. The deal was set by the P5+1² to control Iran's behaviour and activities to obtain a nuclear weapon. Unfortunately, there are reports that there are numerous violations on the terms and conditions of the agreement, but there is not sufficient condemnation or emphasis on enforcement.

The nuclear deal has its weaknesses. The region sees the deal as postponing Iran's activities for the next 10 years. It is not preventive. The nuclear deal does not include inspection of military facilities. The region feels that Iran is still moving forward to obtain a nuclear weapon in secret through its military facilities. It is important to include tougher

¹ Gulf Cooperation Council

² The five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany

conditions and a mechanism that could enforce and hold Iran responsible for any breaches of the nuclear deal.

The Chairman: May I stop you there for a moment, Dr Al Hamli? The answer to the question is that you think the main concern is Iran.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Yes, it is Iran's behaviour.

The Chairman: Because obviously we want to come to our relations with Iran and the deal in detail, but as far as you are concerned the enemy is Iran.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Yes, it is Iran and the politicisation of religion. Iran has been politicising religion and this is embodied in its constitution, which is a political ideology that derives from what they call the Athnā'ashariyyah sect. This is a problem and Iran is spreading insecurity in the region through the politicisation of religion. Iran has been supporting militia in Syria. We know for a fact that the Qods Force is operating in Syria and that Hezbollah, which is funded and supported by Iran, is also acting in Syria and elsewhere. We have seen reports that there are strong connections between Iran and the Houthis in Yemen. The real transformation of power, as I understand it, is the shift of power from the legitimate state to illegitimate non-state actors. Militia and guerrilla war is spreading in the region. This is what Iran is trying to do. It is weakening the region to gain as much control as it can.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I want to try to understand what you are saying about Iran. Is your main problem the policies that it is pursuing in Yemen, Syria and, to some extent, in Iraq and Bahrain? Those are external interventions, which are indirect in many cases. That is one thing. Or, is it about the operation of the nuclear agreement? If I understood you rightly, you said that the nuclear agreement itself covered all civilian staff, but there was nothing to deal with any research they might be undertaking in their military establishments. That would, of course, be in breach of the non-proliferation treaty if they were doing it, on which there is not, in fact, any evidence. The latest IAEA³ report on civilian staff was completely okay. Could you tell us the balance between those two things? Do you think they are both equal, or is the nuclear one more important?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Both, actually. Iran is trying to gain control of the region and it is doing it through non-state actors—the militias on the ground in different places in the region—and through obtaining a nuclear weapon. It is approaching its goal in different ways. This is where we find Iran, with the type of nuclear deal that it is getting, getting a green light to spread its control over the region.

Q73 **Lord Grocott:** In the broadest terms, given that the trend in the past two or three years has been towards trying to reach some sort of settlement with Iran, bringing Iran more closely into the international

³ International Atomic Energy Authority

community again—or, on the other hand, further isolation of Iran internationally—would you like to see it more isolated by the policies of the West or indeed the region generally? Allied to that question, I note your comment in your paper that the people in the region welcome the chance for a new direction for American foreign policy following the Trump election. Could you give us a picture of the key aspects of American foreign policy that you would like to see changed?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: First, Iran has to understand that there are consequences of its behaviour in the region. The president-elect made it clear that he will take a strong stance against Iran's behaviour in the region. He mentioned that he is not comfortable with the nuclear deal. The new Administration have taken a position on the politicisation of religion—of Islam—which is another important issue. The politicisation of religion has not come just from Iran. Other groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, are doing the same thing. Daesh and all the extremists are trying to establish what they call the Islamic state, according to their understanding—the Caliphate. Both are targeting the same objective. I think the new Administration are very clear on this, and we hope that they will have a clear foreign policy in the region towards Iran, fighting terrorism and the politicisation of religion.

The Chairman: We will come to the US line later on. What does the UK do in all this? Lord Jopling.

Q74 **Lord Jopling:** Let us start with the UK's connection with all this. As you will know, Prime Minister May has promised stronger security relations with the Gulf countries. She has proposed that the UK and the Gulf Cooperation Council have a counterterrorism working group. Do you believe that the Gulf States, as well as the UAE, view these steps as welcome and sufficient? What sort of relationship do you think the UAE and the Gulf states are looking for with the United Kingdom?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: I think this working group is really important. The working group will facilitate more understanding about the perceptions of security in the region. There are differences in the perception of security. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood has been proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UAE as well as in other GCC countries. There is a government report in the UK saying that there are concerns about the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood. Then we hear about the Home Office guidance that Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood should obtain asylum as they are at risk of persecution. There is a report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament which is very positive about the Muslim Brotherhood.

We need to come together in this working group to understand how to fight terrorism through military and non-military means. The GCC has the concept of a non-violent Islamist who seeks the same objectives that the violent people are seeking. As Theresa May put it clearly in her December speech to the GCC, we are committed to fighting violent and non-violent extremism. We are also looking to tackle the ideology that drives these people to go to fight on the battlefield. The working group will be

facilitating this discussion and will come up with a common understanding of the threat that the region is facing.

Lord Jopling: Do you think the UK should have a deeper relationship than the one that the Prime Minister has suggested and, if so, in what way?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: There are historical connections between the GCC and the UK. It is very important for the UK to come again to the region and try to help and to counter the threat that the region is facing. The threat that the region is facing is also a threat to the world and to the UK itself. To come together and find ways to fight the Islamic extremists and the ideology behind them is very important. The UK role will be very much welcomed.

Q75 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** On a rather delicate issue in terms of our relationship with the Saudis, the Emiratis and so on, what reaction, if any, has there been to the British Foreign Secretary's comment that part of the problem is the Gulf states acting as, I think he said, puppeteers in some of these conflicts, which was widely perceived as referring to the Saudis and, by implication, the Emiratis? Has there been any reaction?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Yes, it was a statement about proxy wars and the involvement of Saudi Arabia.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Has there been any reaction to this? Has it had any lasting effect or has it been put aside as a rather idiosyncratic personal comment?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: The Prime Minister made it clear that this is not the government position.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Yes, this is a new convention whereby Cabinet Ministers express personal views, apparently.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Yes. If the Prime Minister is saying something and the Foreign Secretary is saying something else, that will definitely have an impact on the relationships. But the Prime Minister made it clear that this is not the government position. Also, the Foreign Secretary went to the region and he did not actually mention this and was clear about being on the side of the GCC countries. I do not think this will have any more impact, but it is my feeling that the Foreign Secretary is supposed to be more in line with the government line.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I think you can criticise the language that the Foreign Secretary used, which was probably unwise, but would you disagree with the view that he was basically expressing, that a continuing, increasing hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is spreading to sub-state conflict in other places, is not a long-term recipe for a viable, peaceful, stable and prosperous region?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: He mentioned proxy wars bringing instability to the region. I do not think there is a proxy war on the side of the GCC

countries or Saudi Arabia. A proxy war, as I understand it, is when militia are used by some states to fight on behalf of other states. This is true in relation to Iran: it is using Hezbollah and the Houthis and different people on the ground. But the Saudis are using their own military to defend themselves on the borders of Yemen. They are not using different militia to further their objectives in any places. Iran is not listening. Hostilities began between Saudi Arabia and Iran when people in Iran went into the streets and burned the embassy, and the Government did not take action against this. That was a real threat to their relationship and to the GCC as a whole and was a sign that has been taken very seriously by the GCC countries. In addition to this, the militia that are operating in different places in the region are bringing insecurity and instability. Saudi Arabia is using its own military to fight in Yemen to defend itself. Many missiles have been thrown at the Saudis. This is a very important development to be borne in mind.

The Chairman: Let us move on to human rights. Lady Coussins.

- Q76 **Baroness Coussins:** The UK Government are consistently lobbied by various NGOs and others to raise concerns about human rights in the region, particularly with the Bahraini and Saudi Governments. There is also the view that there is reputational damage and other costs to the UK as it pursues simultaneously its commercial interests and its role as an honest broker. Would you agree with that view, and what steps do you think the UK could take to achieve a balance between its security interests on the one hand and the concerns of the domestic audience to do with human rights on the other?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Human rights is a very complex issue. It is not a simple trade-off between embarking on commercial activities and economic development with the GCC and protecting human rights. The human rights concept involves cultural and many other dimensions that make it so complex. It would be foolish if the Government stopped its relationships and furthering its economic interests in the region because of human rights or because of the demands of the domestic audience.

There are concerns about human rights. The Gulf countries and Governments are working towards better protection for human rights. But how the West understands human rights and how the GCC understands human rights is relatively different. This is a separate platform where Governments need to open a dialogue and discuss human rights more. Human rights require trust between Governments and people; they need the support of both sides.

We also need to come together on a path that combines human rights and human security. Countries, especially in the Middle East, need to engage in military activities to counter terrorism. Now, after the rise of terrorism in different parts of the world, they need to engage in certain types of activities that could damage human rights, but sacrificing certain human rights to the wider security, is a necessity today. If the demands of the local audience are driven by some other foreign countries urging them, those have no relevance to human rights. In Bahrain, for example,

most of the opposition parties cite Iran's support of these groups not just to get their human rights protected but to further their political agenda. Human rights and the political agenda are two completely different things. If we are talking about certain individual religious people, we are talking about the rights of the minority—that is something else. Open political discussion is happening in Bahrain and Kuwait. People in the region are moving forward towards this, but this needs time. Everything cannot change all of a sudden. As I said, human rights take time and need trust first. There is a mistrust between Governments and those kinds of people, especially when Iran interferes. It is really important to bear in mind that stopping all relationships and economic involvement with the GCC just because of local demands on human rights would be foolish.

Q77 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Going back to the issue of Iran and the Gulf states, at the moment, if I understand it correctly, British policy is to strengthen its alliance with the Gulf states and its involvement in their security—that is what the Prime Minister said when she was there—and, at the same time, to uphold and be quite tough about the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal. Do you think that that policy can be sustained or do you think the two objectives are so contradictory that one of them should be dropped? How should the UK handle the situation if the new US Administration were to try to destroy or pull out of the Iran nuclear deal?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: I think the deal should be supported, but it needs to include different dimensions. The deal needs first to make sure that there are enough mechanisms on the ground to hold Iran responsible for any violations. There is a need also to have mechanisms that get control over any secret activities and military facilities. I think the UK could play an important role between the new US Administration and the European countries that are involved in the agreement. We do not know what the position of the new Administration is but the UK could also play a role between the GCC countries and the US Administration. It will be welcomed if the UK will stress the point that the discussion of the nuclear deal needs to engage the GCC countries as well. The GCC countries have concerns about the deal and these need to be taken into account while negotiating or adding to the deal to strengthen it and make it work.

I would like to raise another point about the deal. There is an opportunity for the deal to include a wider security and safety issue. In pursuing Iran's activities to develop nuclear for civil use, it needs also to take into account the equipment and technology that are being used. I would like to bring to the Committee's attention the fact that the Bushehr facility is using old technology, and there are reports of a safety breach. Iran needs to sign the 1994 Nuclear Safety Treaty and the 1997 Treaty on Safety for Waste and Spent Fuel on the safety and security of its facilities. These two treaties have peer-review mechanisms that will contribute to the overall development.

As I said, there are concerns from the GCC that need to be taken into account when they discuss the deal. I think the UK would be welcome to

engage in the region again in the discussion and mediate between the European countries and the US.

The Chairman: Now on other parts of the turbulent scene, Lord Inglewood.

Q78 **Lord Inglewood:** We have had quite a bit of evidence that it looks as if some kind of decentralised political structure will emerge in Iraq and Syria. The evidence we have been given is that this country should not seek to get in the way of that. Is that your analysis: that it is likely to happen and that we should not intervene in trying to stop it? How, if at all, do you think this country and the other international global players should try to build relations with these sub-state actors?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: A resolution to the conflict in Syria and Iraq is very challenging. Decentralisation could be an option, but I want to raise a very important point. Decentralisation on the basis of religious or ethnic differences is not welcome. It will contribute to future violence. It is not working in the region.

Lord Inglewood: If that is the case—if it is so undesirable—how do you stop it?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: If you look at the challenges, it is about not just ending the conflict but rebuilding a structure of government that works, functions and contributes to security in the region. It is a long-term process. We need to invest more in a secular state that is based not on religion or ethnic differences but as a state for all. This is important. We need to build a relationship between people and the state. We need to see belief in the state return, not destroy the current state and have another microstate. This fragmentation will not contribute anything positive to the region. It will even worsen the situation.

The Chairman: Do you expect Syria and Iraq as they are presently delineated to emerge as total states from the present turmoil? Do you see them remaining in the shape they are now?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Yes. As states they could remain in their shape. When you promote groups based on their sect or religion, this paves the way for them to have the chance to get into government and establish their state on their sect or ethnicity, such as the Kurds or some of the Shia sect—even some of the Sunni sect. This will not contribute to the situation in any way. Having the state itself come up with a negotiation through which the state will exist and continue to exist, that will build government structures that work and will bring security to society.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I am just trying to follow your line of thought through. I understand very well what you are saying about decentralisation being based not on religious considerations, but in both Syria and Iraq one of the pressures for decentralisation is ethnic, not religious. Do you treat that differently? The Kurds in both countries are pursuing not a religious but an ethnic agenda. In Iraq at least, do you not recognise that the pressure for decentralisation largely comes due to the

Shia majority in Iraq, which means that if you have a strong central Government it will almost necessarily be dominated by Shia political parties? This is what is driving the demands for a less centralised system.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: You mean the current Government of Iraq? Could you repeat the question?

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I am merely asking whether there are not contradictions in what you said. That is all.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: The current Government in Iraq are also a sectarian Government, as they are a mostly Shia Government who are supporting and furthering Iran's agenda in Iraq. Most of the Sunni and Arab tribes and people in Iraq are not happy with the way they are governing. Instead of building a national army, they are building militia. This is what I meant about the new shift of power from state actors to illegitimate non-state actors being promoted by Iran. We need not to pave the way for Governments like that in Iraq and Syria. Governments should be based not on sects, religion or origin. It should be a Government for all. I fail to understand how western countries do not get it. The West has been through this throughout its history. It has come out of it and has built nations that work and bring security to their societies. The same should apply here: a secular state would be a solution to what the region faces.

The Chairman: The last, and in the way the biggest, question is about America in the region.

Q79 **Baroness Helic:** Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has invested a lot of personal effort in building relations with the United Kingdom and the United States. One could argue that with the United States in particular the United Arab Emirates has a very strong relationship built on economic and security bases. If you look at the security links, quite a lot has been done on counterterrorism, joint training of the air force et cetera. Yet it came to me as a surprise that Abu Dhabi was one of the few world capitals that welcomed President Trump's election. I read your article in which you recognise the possibility of President Trump healing US-Gulf rifts. I fully understand the dissatisfaction over the Iran nuclear deal, the uneasy feeling in Abu Dhabi about the human rights agenda coming from London and what you said about the Muslim Brotherhood, but where exactly, after what one could label all the successes of good relations between the UAE and the US, do you see space for healing the rift? Where is this rift, apart from what you have already said?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: According to his statement, President Trump and the people he is appointing are clear about the region. They have a much clearer approach. It is to take a strong position against Iran and political Islam, which is the Muslim Brotherhood, Daesh, al-Qaeda—all these terrorist people. This in itself is a major issue. Also, the potential new Administration is open to a different dialogue with Russia. They seem to be working towards a more stable region. With open relationships between the US and Russia there could be a deal to bring stability in

Syria and Iraq. The region has been lacking a precise and clear American foreign policy. The new Administration could bring a much clearer approach and a strategy that works.

Baroness Helic: This clarity you expect from President Trump's Administration and the potential closeness with the Russian Government could open a bit of a rift between the United States and the United Kingdom in the way these relationships are perceived. What would be your advice and thoughts on how to handle that difference between what may be the US's and the UK's attitudes towards the region?

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: According to the speech by the Prime Minister, Theresa May, I do not feel there is much difference between the UK and the new Administration in the US.

Baroness Helic: On Russia.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Not about Russia. Russia needs to be included in the negotiation. We need to open discussions with Russia to understand what it wants from the region. I find inconsistencies in the Russian foreign policy. It is backing Iran, but it still wants a deal and to build good relationships with the GCC. We might need mediation, or to sit together and have an open discussion. Theresa May made clear that the UK is backing the GCC and it has a clear eye on the threat that Iran poses to the region. They are on the side of the region against Iran's behaviour. I do not feel that there is a difference between the Prime Minister's speech, the current Government's stance and the new US Administration. They seem to be coming together.

The Chairman: Dr Al Hamli, on that slightly positive note, we must sadly leave it here. Time is short, but your contribution has been extremely useful to us. Thank you very much indeed. We are very grateful to you for being here this morning.

Dr Ahmed Al Hamli: Thank you for having me.

Examination of witnesses

Mr Adrian Chadwick, Mr Oliver McTernan, Mr Tarik Kafala and Mr Sam Farah.

Q80 The Chairman: Gentlemen, good morning. Thank you very much for being with us. I remind you that this is an open public session and is on the record. There will be transcripts. If you want to look at them afterwards or even change them, you will be free to do so. Thank you for sparing the time to come before us. You are really the titans of soft power in this age of soft, smart and hard power. We want to gather your wisdom on how you see the changing pattern of power and force in the Middle East, which is our focus. It is quite difficult to put it in a single frame but we are trying our best. If, in answering questions, any of the four of you would like to come in, that is fine by us. We will not cover it all in the time available—we never do—but we will try our best.

Let us start with the obvious question: how is soft power understood by your organisations? We all talk about it a lot. We study it, we write reports on it; we think it is the new thing. It sounds rather nicer than hard power, if that means military force and killing, but what does it really boil down to? Let us have an opening, rather general answer on that. I will go from left to right and start with Mr Chadwick.

Adrian Chadwick: Thank you very much, Lord Chairman. The British Council views soft power as a country's ability to make friends and influence people through its most attractive assets. As the Committee knows very well, in the UK's case those are language, education, arts and culture. Fundamental to our understanding of soft power is that it is most effective when it is mutually beneficial, when it engages overseas countries and partners in agendas which matter to them as well as to us, and when it accrues over the long term. So mutuality and long term are key.

It is our assessment that arguably no country is more connected than the UK. If you look at the UK's soft power assets, we have English as the language of business and the internet. We have a globally significant cultural sector—arts, national museums, literature and music. We have world-class science and research—no country has more Nobel laureates. We have the second-ranked higher education system in the world. One in four world leaders or heads of government studied in the UK. We are ranked second to the US as the preferred destination for international students and we have more universities in the top 100 than any country apart from the US. So higher education is another fantastic asset, along with sport.

Within that broad cultural context, we see the British Council as being one of the UK's key soft power cultural relations assets. We are at the coal face. We are overseas. We have built trust through the mutual exchange of knowledge and ideas in the region and globally through English teaching, education, skills, and our work in civil society and with culture, arts and sport. We built that through history: our first overseas operation was in Cairo in 1938. We built it through presence: we have

1,600 colleagues in 17 MENA⁴ countries. We have 30 offices, and since 2011 we have reopened in Alexandria and Basra, and in Algeria we have moved out of the embassy into our own premises, with a big teaching and public offer.

We have also built it through scale. I hope we will have a chance later to talk more about our activity but, for example, 85,000 people a year come into our offices to learn English with us. More than half a million people a year in the region come to take UK qualifications and examinations with us, the vast majority being young, with a good gender balance. Last year we reached 17.9 million people digitally—up 45% since 2014. So scale is a big part of our work.

I will make just two final points to summarise our understanding of soft power—to give my fellow panellists a chance to contribute. Last year we were the touchpoint for Global Britain for just under 20 million people in the region through our activities, our programmes and our offices and presence. Finally, as the Committee will be well aware, on the question of the tangible benefits of soft power, research by the University of California in 2015 showed that a 1% increase in soft power ranking equates to a 0.8% increase in exports. There is a prosperity/commercial benefit to this. The British Council's 2012 report *Trust Pays* showed that the average level of trust in the UK is 24 percentage points higher among those people who have engaged with the UK's cultural assets, language and education. In Saudi Arabia, my region, which was one of those countries, there was a 16% increase in levels of trust in the UK as a result of that cultural engagement. There is a cultural engagement benefit there. At this point I will close on the British Council's assessment of soft power and where we sit in it.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Chadwick. That is a very full, detailed and satisfactory answer. Mr McTernan, where do you see soft power taking us?

Oliver McTernan: Thank you, Lord Chairman. Our organisation, Forward Thinking, works in the field of mediation and conflict resolution. I agree entirely with Adrian that the first definition of soft power should be in the field of language and education. The challenge for every organisation is to reach beyond the elites—those naturally attracted, who want to learn English and want a higher education—to find ways of encouraging critical thinking based on principles and values within a broader section of society.

Our particular role as a non-state actor—an NGO—is to try to create what in the old language would be described as Track II spaces to enable Track I dialogue. There is a great need today to have engagement and dialogue, looking at the real issues, without the restraints of state policies. I think that can be achieved through creating, as I say, these forums and spaces where this sort of dialogue can go on. You can engage

⁴ Middle East and North Africa

at a very high level—at foreign ministry level—without implications for a larger organisation such as the EU or a country such as Britain.

The Chairman: Thank you. Mr Farah and Mr Kafala, you are the masters of the message. How do you think your message fits into the soft power scene?

Sam Farah: I will focus on the BBC Arabic Service and what it does in the Arab world. Soft power is a very tricky thing in the Arab world but that is not what we do. We focus, as Oliver said, on engaging audiences in a type of media that is not necessarily available to them all the time—a type of freedom of speech that is not always accessible to them. We engage them in that sort of dialogue and we do not think about soft power as being what we do. We never have. In my 20 years at the BBC I do not think I have ever been in a meeting where we discussed that this is what we do. But we realise that this is a by-product of what we do, which is great. Tarik can speak about the rest of the World Service.

Tarik Kafala: Speaking more broadly, the World Service's principal purpose, as Sam was saying, is to provide trusted and engaging current affairs and news. Impartiality and trust are key. The happy by-product of this—that soft power can accrue—is clearly of benefit to us and more widely. Where does the soft power lie? How do we think about it? In the BBC's global agenda, our purpose is provide benefits for our international audience. These are to do with accurate, trustworthy information provided clearly, engagingly and entertainingly, in a way that they can receive—the most direct communication. We do this through all platforms and media. We do this currently in 29 languages, including English. We are growing to 40 languages. We do this by producing documentaries, news and current affairs. We do this in-country—we have offices across the world. We have important hubs in Delhi, Cairo, Nairobi and Beirut. We are building one in Lagos. We exist, like the British Council, at the front line of the territories, areas and issues that we are talking about.

Our research shows that the BBC as a brand—as a name—is the most trusted in news internationally. That is consistent. It is not only our research; it is much more widely attested to. The audiences we reach indicate that. They are growing. The English World Service and the languages services reach 246 million people a week. Once you take in the BBC's international commercial operations—the 24-hours news channel in English, BBC World News, and the website, bbc.com, which is available for international audiences—that rises to 320 million. If you take in Worldwide, which is the resale of BBC programmes and products, it rises to 350 million.

Key for us in our relationship with our audiences is trust. The benefit to the United Kingdom is one that we do not define. We define soft power as a concept in a similar way to my colleagues but, as I say, our aim is news and current affairs of the highest standard. When we talk about the benefit or the soft power that can be accrued, we try to define that. In a recent Chatham House survey of opinion formers across the world, 68% came to the conclusion that the World Service was the strongest

advocate of the United Kingdom's national interest. For a wider survey of the general public and the United Kingdom, the World Service came a close second to the Armed Forces. That, we believe, is why the Government continue to invest and expand investment in the World Service.

Sam Farah: May I add something? Particularly in the Arab world and possibly in the rest of the world, soft power is at its most effective when it is seen as independent from the state and Government of the country it originates from. That independence is critical for soft power to be any sort of power.

The Chairman: You are saying that there is no hint of propaganda.

Q81 **Baroness Hilton of Eggardon:** In talking about the image of our country in that part of the world, you have mentioned only the Arab world. You have not mentioned Iran and the Farsi languages. I wonder about the extent to which our image has been tarnished by Iraq and whether you think the recent spat between the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister has had any influence in that region. The major split is between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Are you making any efforts to bridge that divide by the detached, objective information you provide on both sides of it? Is that affecting our image?

Tarik Kafala: We would not make a specific effort as a result of events, UK foreign policy, or UK military actions or interventions. Generally we are the British Broadcasting Corporation, but we broadcast in these 29—soon to be 40—languages. It is widely recognised as the British Broadcasting Corporation. That is clearly part of what we do. The activity itself, I hope, helps with those issues you are talking about to do with image, damage in relations or anything else.

The Chairman: Does anyone else have any comment on how it benefits us, if it does?

Oliver McTernan: Could I address the particular question of what can be done to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia closer together? For the past two years we have been organising what we call the Helsinki Policy Forum. The idea came to us from someone in Saudi Arabia who felt the need for some sort of space or forum where they could engage Iran. With the help of the Finnish Government we have constructed a regular dialogue that brings together foreign office officials, parliamentarians, and business people from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia, as well as 11 different European states. That enables this kind of dialogue in a Track II setting—even the Foreign Minister of Iran attended the last meeting; we hope that the Turkish Foreign Minister will come to the next—where they can explore mechanisms. We are trying to help to create a mechanism that can first of all try to prevent crisis by recognising it ahead of time and creating exchange and, secondly, if we fail on that, to manage crisis in the region. It is a very small step, but the fact is you can get these actors in the same room. What is important is the independent image: it is a non-state actor that can facilitate it, with the support of states. It

gives us possibilities and hopes that we can address the present conflict in the region.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Do you have the ambition or the aspiration to move that from Track II to Track I? That is to say, is the basic aspiration behind your Track II activity a region that had some kind of organisation that brings together all countries and subscribes to non-intervention in internal politics, non-use of force, economic co-operation and so on?

Oliver McTernan: I like to describe it as a need for alternative leadership. We were locked in the Track II/Track I definitions from the Cold War period. We are now living in a very changed world where there are times when it is appropriate for non-state actors to take leadership in initiating something, but it reaches a time where that has to be taken over at state level if it is to be effective. If one rushes to mechanisms that are surrounded by bureaucracy, involved in long negotiations and so forth, you get side-tracked from the issues. It is about trying to find a way to deal with potential conflicts in real time, without the whole of the bureaucracy involved in it, yet at the same time be effective and achieve results.

The Chairman: It is a very changed situation, as you say.

Q82 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** May I thank you at the beginning for all the work you and your organisations do? I had reason when in government to be very thankful for each of your organisations—although it was sometimes uncomfortable with the BBC, obviously. Mr McTernan mentioned non-state actors in the sense of individuals who can form the basis of a growing relationship and have liberty to act far more widely than formal Governments would in the first instance. We can see that with early discussions with the IRA, and those between the South African Government and the ANC and so on. Another set of non-state actors are perhaps more difficult to reach. One of the recurrent features of the evidence we have received is the importance of non-state actors or sub-state actors in the context of fragmentation in the Middle East of some formal states. What challenges has that presented for your organisations, particularly for the British Council and Mr McTernan's organisation? How have you sought to meet those challenges to reach out to either sub-state groupings in traditional states or non-state actors, some of which would be very hostile to formal state leaderships?

Adrian Chadwick: This gets to the heart of one of the very important transitions that the region has gone through and how we have responded to it. Essentially, we have relooked at how we engage with the Middle East and North Africa, responding to the changes in the context which Lord Reid described and which are well-known to the panel. First, we have adopted an internal strategy to halve the number of projects we do. Between 2013 and 2015 we reduced the number of projects we did. We concentrated on priority work in priority countries. We internally redeployed an extra £1 million into the Levant/north Africa response, for example.

We also took the strategy that we would engage at three levels. We would look at systemic reform, which remains the key to long-term stability, trust and prosperity in the region. That is in reform of education systems and of justice pathways, and improved dialogue between citizen and states. There is a big focus on systemic reform.

However, we recognise that there are tens of millions of young people in the region who cannot wait for the benefits to come from that systemic reform, so the middle tier of our engagement is around the positive pathways. That is engaging tens of millions of young men and women in the region through universities and through civil society organisations. There are programmes such as Young Arab Voices, through which 100,000 young people in the region have had the chance to receive training in debate. These are core, fundamental skills: the ability to express an opinion, to listen to the alternative opinion, to argue for the alternative opinion, to understand what is an opinion and what is a fact, and so on. On the back of this, more than 10,000 people have been involved in debating societies—in Tunisia, for example—which take place in universities and civil society organisations. That civil space is very important.

We have other networks. For example, the Mobaderoon Network is a network of 4,000 young civil society activists operating with the displaced and diaspora Syrian community and inside Syria. Again, this is about providing people with the skills to engage communities in the most difficult of conversations. The month before last, we met a group of civil society activists who had crossed the border from Syria to meet us in Lebanon and who were going back the following day. They are still working in Aleppo and Damascus, trying to find common ground and to build dialogue with people there. So that is a big area around positive pathways, English language and upskilling for tens of millions of people.

The final area is future leaders: recognising the importance of leaders in communities, in college, in school and so on. That is how we have responded; we have done much more in that informal civil society space, helping young people who want to be part of the solution but feel that they are being problematised and that the situation is securitising them, not equipping them to be part of the solution. This is all underpinned by digital and the Arabic language, which is another way in which we engage—as much as 70% of our social media presence is now Arabic language.

The Chairman: How do you steer through the situation in, for instance, Egypt? I remember visiting the British Council in Egypt. It was a crowded place full of enthusiasm. First, the western Governments seemed to be supporting Mr Morsi to the distaste of the Egyptian regime and then he was out and the al-Sisi regime was in. How does the British Council steer between those two? My impression when I went there, which was at the time of Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, was that there was some unease and hostility among the young people towards what had happened at government level. How has the British Council handled those delicacies?

Adrian Chadwick: I would make two points. First, the underlying needs of the young people in Egypt remain consistent: access to English language and to quality training and skills to help them both to improve their own lives and livelihoods through finding employment and to manage themselves while they wait for a job. So the underlying needs remain the same: the removal of cronyism, better opportunities and the chance to realise their aspirations. That was consistent. What was very interesting for us was that during that transition of power there were moments when it was difficult for the Egyptian Government to speak formally to the embassy, as a representative of Her Majesty's Government, but they would still speak to us. The people and authorities in Egypt manage to differentiate—this comes back to my colleague's comment on things being arm's length—between the Government and the British Council and to recognise the mutuality and long-term agenda that we are working to. Having said that, of course there were hardships. We evacuated colleagues. We had a very complex balance between duty of care to our colleagues, our customers and our partners and the desire to remain open and to continue to offer the English-language skills, the debating skills and the skills to be an active contributor to your community, which were never more needed than at that point.

The Chairman: How does the BBC cope with that sort of shifting pattern?

Tarik Kafala: It is complicated but, again, there is a distance between us as an organisation, and the relationship that we have with our audiences, and the perceptions or feelings towards the UK Government or its foreign policy, as there would be between the views of the United Kingdom and the Government. There is always that distance. We, too, have many staff in Cairo; periods of unrest, whether they are civil or wider, are extremely challenging. A key part of what we try to do with our programming is to encourage debate and interaction. Again, that is an area where we see an immediate benefit. We focus strongly on social, gender and religious issues, which are areas that, as Sam said, many of the broadcasters that exist in the same space as us do not tackle. One of our key selling points or points of differentiation with our competitors is that we challenge power and authority, be that political, institutional, patriarchal or military.

Q83 **Baroness Coussins:** You mentioned the importance of English-language skills, Mr Chadwick, but language and intercultural understanding cut both ways. You also mentioned the importance of the reputation of universities in the UK. However, you do not need the fingers of both hands to count the number of universities where you can still do a degree in Arabic or even wider Middle Eastern studies. How important is that for you and your work, and indeed for the pipeline of people with the language skills and cultural understanding who might end up working for the BBC World Service? We urgently need improvement to the provision of linguists in Arabic and other languages of the region coming out of UK universities.

Adrian Chadwick: We fully support that position. We live it in the region. I have a helpful opportunity to correct my earlier mistake, which

was to say that 70% of our digital content is in Arabic—all our web presence is in Arabic and English. We live it in the office. I speak in Arabic. I have a colleague, my country director in Libya, who translates contemporary Arabic literature into English. We have an Arabic speaker in Saudi. We are living it in the region. It is a critical part of mutuality. We have just completed a phase of a project to try to support the teaching of Arabic in 50 schools in the UK. Our biggest contribution, which we spend a lot of time on, is advocacy; it is precisely your point, Baroness Coussins. It is about emphasising the need for young British people to be internationally mobile, open and curious to the world and learning foreign languages.

Tarik Kafala: I absolutely agree with Adrian's comments. I graduated from St Andrews University. Three years later, the formal Arabic degree, with language, history, Islam and pre-Islamic poetry, was closed. It has now been reopened—I say that very happily—but there is a shortage of British-trained Arabists; there is no question about it. Most of our staff are Arabs from various countries, but 10 or 15 years ago that was not the case.

Q84 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Could we look at the question of Iran and Persian, as the conversation so far has been about Arab-speaking countries? Given that Iran was perhaps the locus classicus for the BBC being at odds with an authoritarian regime, in the period when the Shah was about the fall, how are you avoiding those problems with a regime in Iran now that, although it probably leaves a little more space for debate than a totally authoritarian regime would, is certainly not fully democratic? Mr McTernan has spoken a little about the Track II possibilities, but what about the British Council or the BBC in particular—the Persian service, the Persian television service and so on?

Tarik Kafala: Our Persian service broadcasts radio, digital and television. We have no staff working for the BBC Persian service who are based in Iran. We are not able to. We broadcast and distribute our digital material internationally and to Iran, so we have access to large audiences that are very strong and are growing in Iran, but we have no working relationship with the Iranian authorities. As Members of the Committee will know, our staff are harassed. It is a very difficult relationship. When we are able to send people to Iran to report, it is on condition that the material is not used on BBC Persian. It is a very complicated situation, but it is a classic situation in the sense that we have no access to the territory but we report on it in detail. It is a continual challenge and we are forever having to adapt. The space for us as BBC Persian in Iran does not exist at all.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Are the Government taking steps on your behalf to make that situation a little less dire?

Tarik Kafala: That has been the work of many years and we have not seen any fruit from it. We are supported very strongly in that. At times of specific harassment of family members of BBC staff—the families of Iranian journalists who are working in London can be harassed in Iran—we are supported very actively.

The Chairman: Mr McTernan, did you want to add to that?

Oliver McTernan: Not particularly, other than to emphasise the importance of the BBC in reaching out and creating critical thinking. That is a very important role.

The Chairman: You are not the Government but in some cases you get support from the Government. Our final questions concern what the support is going to be. Lord Grocott has a particular question to lead us into this discussion.

Q85 **Lord Grocott:** It picks up a little on what we have been talking about in relation to the Persian service. I think the Beeb does a terrific job but I have a question about your newsgathering. Getting accurate reportage can be quite difficult even in an open western democracy. I have two questions: one is about numbers and the other is about access. How many people are there on the ground in whichever countries you want to tell me about? Let us take Egypt: how many people are operating there, particularly if you discount the ones who are based in Cairo? If you try to news gather in any country it is not a good idea to stay in the capital, although sometimes that is all you can do. It is about numbers, but it is also about access. You said how impossible—or very difficult indeed—it is as far as Iran is concerned. Would it be too embarrassing if I asked you to give us some indication of which are the most difficult countries to get accurate information out of—leaving aside the war zones; Yemen and Syria go without saying—in order to transmit your bulletins?

Tarik Kafala: I will talk first about Cairo and then about Iran, being extremes. In Cairo we have a hub bureau which includes BBC Monitoring, BBC Media Action, newsgathering for the domestic English audience, and BBC Arabic. We broadcast radio programmes live from there. We gather television programmes and we have a newsgathering team for reporting, which covers North Africa and Egypt, primarily, but we also deploy occasionally to Iraq and Yemen, for example. That is a very big operation. Altogether, it is probably about 640 people, of whom 140 or 150 will be Egyptian nationals.

Lord Grocott: Are you confident that they feel secure in the operation?

Tarik Kafala: It is not an easy environment to work in. Increasingly, the press is narrowed—the space to argue publicly on political issues is very narrow. We exist outside that, but when the centre of gravity narrows, that causes pressures for us. In terms of security, parts of Egypt are very challenging: obviously, the Sinai Peninsula, but also any large gathering. There are parts of Cairo that are difficult to report in, as well as parts of the Delta region. It varies. It is an office building that looks pretty much like any other office building. It does not have any greater security than others. In the sense of a working environment, it is a comfortable place to be. Many people come and go and commute to work without any issues.

We have no people in Iran. The BBC has a single producer based in Tehran who serves all BBC news outlets other than the Persian service. Thank God for social media—we have a lot of contributors in Iran. We have a lot of people who contribute anonymously to us and provide news and content for us. Otherwise, we report on the country from the outside.

Lord Grocott: Contributing anonymously is not the most reliable.

Tarik Kafala: It is not, and these relationships are built on many years of work and establishing trust.

The Chairman: Before we go on, I left Lord Inglewood out of the previous discussion. Do you want to come in?

Q86 **Lord Inglewood:** I have a very quick question. You were talking about an insufficiency of teaching of the kinds of things that are useful to you in your work—language, history and culture—in universities and schools in this country. What degree of insufficiency do you consider there to be? Is it enormously underprovided for or is it just a bit—just to get a feel for what you meant by that?

Sam Farah: You mean in the UK?

Lord Inglewood: Yes.

Sam Farah: It is quite insufficient.

Lord Inglewood: What does “quite” mean, please?

Sam Farah: It means that the majority of our attempts to recruit Arabists or Arabic speakers in the UK end up not being fruitful and then we have to go to the region.

The Chairman: Sorry, Lord Grocott, we rather broke into your line of questioning. I know that Baroness Helic wants to come in.

Lord Grocott: Perhaps it is a question that you do not want to answer about which of the states in the region that we are looking at are the most difficult in which to acquire accurate reporting information. Iran is a given and war zones are a given.

Tarik Kafala: Yemen is a war zone in almost all areas and that is very difficult to get into. Getting first-hand information gathered by the BBC is very difficult but we do deploy to Yemen and we have done so very recently. However, there are many humanitarian organisations operating in that area—the UN and *Médecins Sans Frontières*—and we can gather information about conditions and security through them. There are ways to do it. We also have people with whom we have worked over many years, salaried BBC Yemeni journalists and producers who work for us in Sanaa and Aden. There are ways to work in a territory such as Yemen.

Syria is different again. We have a correspondent permanently based in Damascus and we deploy to rebel-held areas. We achieve what we think is a wide view of the country, on balance, by combining the two. Our

correspondent in Damascus will report on what he can gather and see. That is obviously a limited sphere. Combined with our correspondents in the rebel-held areas, that gives us the full picture.

There is a lot of press activity in the Gulf but it tends to be hugely government-sponsored. We as the BBC find it difficult to get visas to get to the Gulf. We have very good relations with civil society organisations—universities, medics and various institutions—which interact with us. We speak to them, we gather information, we interview them and they take part in programmes. But we have difficult relationships with the various Governments in the region. It varies. Kuwait is much more accessible to us than Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. The UAE is possibly the most difficult place to work in as the BBC. So it varies but the Gulf is difficult to report on. Obviously, there is a huge amount of news and social media activity coming from that region. However, much of it is, again, limited in scope. It is uncritical and often government-led.

Q87 Baroness Helic: You have a potential competitor. I do not know how successful they are but I have noticed that Russia Today and Sputnik are quite active in the areas where the BBC World Service and the soft power of the United Kingdom in general have been active for years. How much of your space has been penetrated by these two organisations? In the post-truth world, are they more successful in their operations than the BBC World Service is in general? In your planning do you take on board the fact that they have been so active over the past five to 10 years and that their success rate in penetrating your traditional market, if I can call it that, has been quite good?

Tarik Kafala: We see Russia Today, or RT, and the other big international competitor CCTV largely not as direct competitors because they are quite explicit about what their aims are. They are to do with representing the views of Russia or China to the world. They are to do with countering a narrative that they see as pro-western. They exist in the same space. The time a reader or viewer has is limited, so they are competitors in that sense. However, our products are very different and distinct. Our editorial approach is to try to make them more distinct. Rather than occupy the same territory by producing generic, international news, our news needs to be cutting through in terms of investigation, originality and challenging the powerful. We respond to these competitors by trying to establish an editorial offer that is more distinctive and not in their space. One of the *raison d'être* of the BBC World Service is to provide news and current affairs where those are not available. If we are providing a similar product to others, we have to change that.

It is not as simple as saying that they have grown. Audiences do grow. Russia Today is very successful in digital video. It is very successful on YouTube. It has very skilled video editors, graphic artists and so on. In that area it is strong. CCTV is very strong in parts of Africa. It invested very heavily in Kenya, in Nairobi. Those are things we have to deal with and adapt to, but overall we do not see them as direct competitors. We do something quite different.

Q88 Lord Jopling: Twice this year I have been in Cairo and I have heard horrific stories about the way the regime treats so-called terrorists arrested in Sinai. I have seen very little reporting of this. Is that because I missed it, or do you doubt that it is true? If it is true, why have we not heard more about it?

Sam Farah: This is the Egyptian authorities' treatment of those whom they call terrorists. It has been reported, but the way it has been reported globally or on the World Service may possibly be slightly different from how it was reported domestically. The sphere of interests for the audience is slightly different. I believe it has reported on, and we have reported on, many things that the Egyptian authorities have been very unhappy about. The most recent one was an investigation we did called "Death in Service", which won a best documentary award. It is about the mistreatment and possible murder of conscripts in the Egyptian armed forces. Obviously, the authorities were very angry that we did this, but on social media Egyptians were saying, "We have media in Egypt. We have journalists. Why do we have to wait, as usual, for the BBC to tell us what is happening in our country?" Reporting does take place. Sometimes it is very hard. Sometimes it takes a very long time, but it is done to a very high standard. That is something we are very proud of and we will continue doing, whether it is about terrorists being mistreated or conscripts in the armed forces.

The Chairman: Mr Chadwick, you wanted to come in on the last question, but carry on.

Adrian Chadwick: To pick up Baroness Helic's question on soft power influence, it is worth capturing that there is a slight relative decline in the UK's standing both globally in the latest Monocle survey, where we dropped a place to fourth, and in the region. This is a very nuanced picture. If I may, I will submit something in writing to give fuller detail, but it is an important point that plays to increased competition, although it is very difficult to attribute quite, for example, what investment China and Russia, to pick up on your examples, are making in the region. It is clearly a big increase. We can quantify the US and that is very significant. It is an important point that there is a slight relative decline in soft power standing for the UK based on surveys from *Arab News* and Monocle.

Q89 The Chairman: I would like to broaden that question and ask about soft power generally. The Chinese are pouring hundreds of millions into their Confucius centres. The Russians are into soft power—everyone is. The Americans has a non-governmental but nevertheless strong input. The competition is very tough. You have partly answered this, but how do you cope with Al Jazeera and 65 other channels pouring into the region? This is not the scene it was 10 or even five years ago.

Tarik Kafala: It is very challenging, but we have to establish ourselves with more distinctive content. In some cases we narrow what we do, rather than have the whole panoply of output. We have to choose our markets and within markets the sectors and type of product we are putting into them. The days when the World Service was the only player

in this field and could do everything are gone. We need to narrow the focus of what we do. That is how we deal with the competition: a distinctive product and clearer aims.

Oliver McTernan: Lord Jopling raised a very important point when considering soft power. There is a perception throughout the region that we are selective in our reporting—I stress it is a perception. That undermines the impact we have. Linked with that is something you raised, Lord Chairman, which is the interplay between interests and values. I was part of a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, which was organised by some of the European foreign ministries three years before the Arab spring. The criticism of western policy in general was that we always put our interests before our principles. The classic example pointed to was the 2006 Palestinian elections. The challenge when the Arab spring came along was whether we would rediscover our values and principles: will they be the guiding force in our foreign policy or will we revert to interests? The common accusation I pick up from the political and youth levels we work on is that we have reverted back to giving interests priority over values. All organisations here have the important challenge that we try to reverse that and communicate to government the importance of value-driven foreign policy—that our interests are, in fact, our values.

Lord Reid brought up a very important point earlier that we did not get a chance to address: how we engage the non-state actors, in particular the groups that fall foul of the current Governments. It is extremely important that we go back to our experience in Northern Ireland and learn the lessons there. I did a comparative study between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflict in Sri Lanka and the conflict in Northern Ireland. The key lesson that we learned in Northern Ireland but have failed to integrate into our current policy is engagement without preconditions.

If people such as Lord Reid had not had the political courage to act in that way, I think we would still have a bombing campaign on the streets of London. I am sure of that, in fact. So that is something unique we have as a country that we have not capitalised on. We take the Israeli political leaders over to Belfast simply to sit with some of the key protagonists so that they can get insights into what was learned there in trying to resolve conflict. I would like to see British foreign policy recognise our success and be guided by that rather than all the time fitting into perceived ways of dealing with things and received analysis, not analysis based on facts.

The Chairman: But does that work with a death cult such as Daesh?

Oliver McTernan: Naturally, there are risk assessments to be taken. You will not engage with the activists who are fighting battles but there are thought patterns—there are scholars who are responsible for the ideology that we have seen being acted out. There is room for engagement on that level in secure settings. That is a possibility. Certainly, we should be

engaging with groups that are not as extreme as Daesh—groups that are grievance-driven but have a religious underpinning to their actions.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I was surprised by what you said about values and interests because a lot of the criticism of President Obama and the US Administration and the Government here was that, when the Arab spring occurred, we were uncritical and naive about it. We thought it was here to stay and the path to a better future. The events have not quite turned out that way. I am not challenging the perception you have but surely it underlines the fact that some people think of us quite differently from the way we think of ourselves.

Oliver McTernan: I think that that criticism is quite unfair. We conducted, for the European Union, national dialogues in both Tunisia and Egypt. Out of the public layer, there was enormous engagement. The Brotherhood did make mistakes. They were learners in how to govern. But they were given a very short period to address those mistakes—in fact, I would say that they were given no opportunity to address those mistakes. My fear is that we have closed the chapter on that. We have left political Islam out there in the wilderness to find its own way and we will have to face the consequences in the future. Rather than continuing the engagement and voicing concerns that Morsi is still imprisoned on charges that, if they were put before international jurists, would be very questionable, we continue now as if it was business as usual. That is where the argument is put forward that we have reverted to what are seen to be our interests, particularly our economic interests, in our policy towards Egypt.

Lord Grocott: You specifically mentioned as an example of putting interests before principles our reaction to elections in the Palestinian Authority. Could you explain precisely what you meant by that?

Oliver McTernan: I will try to be as brief as possible. In 2006 American foreign policy was very much dictated by its economic interests. At that time, its economic interest was seen to be ensuring that certain Arab regimes remained in power because of the oil flow and other business issues. But 2006 disrupted that set pattern of doing business in the Middle East and the Gulf because we suddenly found an elected Islamist Government in power. Before they had an opportunity to be tested to see whether they were capable of governing in a democratic way, we immediately put preconditions. They were preconditions that anyone involved in the Northern Ireland situation would say were unrealistic. No one could accept the preconditions that that Government had been given.

That was perceived in the region as us deliberately, first, not expecting a result in favour of an Islamic party and, secondly, being afraid of the consequences for the region. Had the change and reform Government elected in Palestine been given a chance to govern, and had they governed in a fitting way, it would have pre-empted the Arab spring. It would have raised issues in all the other countries. When this period comes to be written about, there will be lots of questions about our impatience. We do not give people the opportunity to make mistakes or

help them when they make mistakes. We rush into proscribing and outlawing groups. This is where we are sowing the seeds for future problems.

The Chairman: Lord Grocott, I was going to ask whether you wanted the chance to ask the final question, but I think that you have done so.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: It is unfortunate that this was raised right at the end of the session. I think that it merits a session on its own.

The Chairman: I agree that these are very deep and fascinating waters. Thank you very much for being with us and illuminating us on some aspects of this enormous, complex set of issues. As Lord Reid has indicated, we would like another hour or two with you, but it is not possible. Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of witness

Rt Hon Jack Straw.

Q90 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Mr Straw. Thank you very much for sharing your time with us. I am obliged to remind you that these sessions are public. A transcript will come afterwards. If you want to add to it or you do not think it reflects your views, that is for you to deal with. Secondly—perhaps this is a more Committee-specific point—our main stance in these inquiries is to look at the future, not the past, in as far as they can be disconnected from each other. That is not always easy. We are not in grilling or point-scoring mode at all, but we really want to hear your ideas on the present and next phase in this enormously complex set of situations around which we are trying to put a frame, in particular who is now in power, who will be in power, what effect it will have and what that means for us here in the UK.

I will start with a question that you will probably want to generalise a bit, but it starts with a specific point. We used to go around the Middle East and find that the main issue was Israel-Palestine. Now you go around the Middle East and hardly anyone mentions it to you. Indeed, a number of observers, commentators and those involved say we must widen things. The Arab spring, the mobile telephone and new technology have changed everything. The whole argumentation on the nature of democracy has changed things. People have begun to talk about a new policy for the centre ground. Give us a general take on where you stand on all that.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: You are right, Lord Chairman, to say that the Israel-Palestine conflict has dropped out of the headlines, for a variety of reasons, partly because of the much more intense conflicts elsewhere in the region and partly because the specific conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians has become more and more intractable to solve. It remains extremely important. I, however, am very pessimistic about the prospect of any resolution. There are various efforts in play at the moment to try to kick-start some talks. You may know that the French Foreign Minister proposed calling a conference in December, but this morning it was announced that it had been postponed to next month. Meanwhile, the Israelis have made it clear to Mahmoud Abbas that, were he to attend this conference, any prospects of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians would be aborted. You query whether this conference gets going and whether the French are wise to call a conference that will be right up against the inauguration of President Trump. That is for the French to decide.

So far as Israel-Palestine is concerned, the fundamental problem is that the Israelis have been changing the facts on the ground by their continuing building of settlements and, as we see from plans before the Knesset at the moment, plans to legalise not all but many of those settlements. That makes the potential operation of a separate Palestinian state incredibly difficult, particularly in terms of what they are doing in Jerusalem, where they are essentially surrounding the Palestinians who live in east Jerusalem. I would love there to be a prospect of a peace

deal. I am pessimistic about it, notwithstanding the fact that President-elect Trump gave an interesting interview last week, on 22 November, in which he spoke about this conflict. He said that he would “love to be able to be the one that made peace with Israel and the Palestinians”. He said that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who himself is Jewish, would “be very good at it”—that is, securing a peace deal—and that he “knows the region”. He went on, “A lot of people tell me, really great people tell me, that it’s impossible—you can’t do it”. I am not a great person, but that is exactly what I have been saying. He goes on to say, “I disagree. I think you can make peace ... I have reason to believe I can do it”. Well, let us wish him all the best in that endeavour and see what happens but, as I say, I remain pessimistic.

As for the wider region, as we all know, this is incredibly complicated. Were there to be some kind of peace in Syria—which would be peace on Assad and Russia’s terms—and a settlement of some kind in Yemen, you could see the prospects for greater international co-operation breaking out. The first is possible given the military advantage the Assad regime has. The second will happen at some stage, but it is very depressing.

Meanwhile, to anticipate a question that may be raised, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are very poor at the moment after the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the sacking of the Saudi embassy, for which there was absolutely no justification. I gather people from President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif and others were absolutely appalled by this piece of private enterprise by the Basij, the semi-disciplined, non-uniformed militia of the Revolutionary Guards. But it is important to note that the recent deal in OPEC⁵ involved an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia—it could not have happened without it—which, perhaps no surprise, was brokered by President Putin. There is some hope for improvement in Iran-Saudi relations, which is critical to stability in the region, but that will take some time.

The Chairman: We want to come on to your expertise in all these areas, particularly Iran, in a moment, but on this first question, the implication of what I was asking was that, even if by some miracle there was a different Government in Israel, President Trump’s aspirations could go forward and there was some kind of settlement—the kind of thing that you and others such as Dr Kissinger have been working at for 20 years—would that make more than a pimple of difference to the vast storms of ethnic, religious and civil war in Syria and Iran?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: I think that it would. To people not just in the Arab world but in the Muslim world, the obvious injustices carried out by, I am afraid, the Israelis against the Palestinians speak to them of a world that is unfair and does not recognise justice for everybody at all. I do not know how many of the Committee have been to Israel and Palestine in recent years. I was last there three years ago, at this time of year. The situation is terrible and humiliating for Palestinians just going about their

⁵ Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

daily lives—constant gratuitous humiliations. I understand the security concerns of the Israelis—I do not dismiss them for a second—but much of what the Israelis have been doing is unnecessary, with their continued flouting of international law, the building of these settlements and the incredible discrimination they go in for, such as in relation to water. I went to a settlement in south Hebron on top of a hill. The Israelis have water and electricity at relatively cheap prices, but deny piped water just a couple of hundred metres down the hill to a Palestinian village. They then wreck their cisterns. That is an illustration of the problems that the Palestinians face and the difficulty of there being any kind of resolution. The other thing is that, were there a change of Government in Israel, the chances are that it would be a more right-wing Government, rather than a more left-wing Government, because of the very profound demographic changes that have taken place in the past 25 years in the make-up of Israel's population.

Q91 Lord Jopling: Let us go back to Iran. You have been known over the years to be an advocate of a closer relationship with Iran. You even suggested that it might be a potential ally of ours. Is that still your view for the up-to-date situation in Iran? If it is, how should we go about it? Is there not a problem for our relationship with our old established allies in the Gulf? We heard evidence this morning of somebody from the Gulf, from the Emirates, who was telling us that their big great enemy is Iran. How can we ride those two horses at the same time? Do you see a possibility of us being an interlocutor between the two in future? How would you develop this question?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Lord Jopling, I raised the question in a lecture of whether Iran could ever be an ally. I said that was very distant, but I thought we could have much better relations and have it much more as a partner than a potential adversary. That is still my view.

What is critical to improving relations with Iran is that the JCPOA⁶—the agreement that was reached last year and came into force at the beginning of this year on the nuclear dossier—is implemented in full. Although it is being undermined to a degree by hostility in the United States Administration—which may get worse under President Trump; we do not know—there are heavy responsibilities on the British Government to deliver what they agreed. That includes, for example, ending artificial restrictions on the number of visas that the British embassy has been permitted by the Home Office to issue each week. My understanding is that it is issuing only 150 a week when it has the capacity to issue many, many more. The Iranians are for ever reciprocal, so it restricts British businesses going there. It means making a much greater effort by the British Government to ensure that banking facilities are available to British companies wishing to trade with Iran. There are plenty of deals, but in most cases these companies cannot get banking facilities because the big banks such as HSBC have withdrawn. They are all very worried, notwithstanding some points of reassurance by OFAC,⁷ the supervisory

⁶ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal)

⁷ The Office of Foreign Assets Control

agency under the US Treasury, that they will be stung as their predecessors have been.

One of the proposals I have made on this, because it is essential if we are to improve relations with Iran and help the people in the Rouhani Government work to their advantage and not the advantage of quite hostile forces, is that the Bank of England should consider providing clearing bank facilities for British companies that cannot get such facilities from any other bank. That may sound off the wall, but I say to your Lordships that that is exactly what happened in 2000 when Barclays, under intimidation from so-called animal rights activists, withdrew all banking facilities from Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS). I was in the thick of this as Home Secretary because the Home Office licensed Huntingdon Life Sciences, which is a huge and very important company at the centre of medical experimentation. Thankfully, with colleagues in the Treasury, I persuaded the Bank of England to provide banking services to HLS. Those have only recently been withdrawn because HLS now has ordinary banking facilities. Those things ought to happen. Meanwhile, France initially and Germany—the biggest trading partners with Iran—have virtually no restrictions on the number of visas they issue. They are making more progress than we are, although they face similar problems on banking.

On relations with the Saudis, the UAE and other Gulf states, my view is that we should not see relations between Saudi and Iran as a zero-sum game. The truth is that once you clear away some of the smoke, the relationships are very complicated. Yes, at a political, foreign-policy level the UAE regards the Iranians as potentially hostile. But who, during the sanctions period, has been the major trading party with Iran? It is Dubai. When I was in Iran back in October 2015, before the JCPOA came into force, they had the iPhone 6 well in advance of Brits. Everybody has them. Where do they come from? Through Dubai. When we bought a Persian carpet we had had to take literally thousands of pounds and dollars in our pockets because of the banking problems, but we had run out of cash. They said, "Oh, we'll take a credit card". On what was the credit card drawn? Their account in Dubai.

These things are complicated. I have already referred to Saudi's deal directly with Iran over the oil price, which shows that they can co-operate. At the other end of the Gulf, you have Oman. It is a loyal member of the GCC, but it takes a very different view of relationships with Iran from other GCC states. So it is complicated.

My view is that it is not in the interests of Saudi and the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain for there to be a stand-off between that side of the Gulf and the Iranian side. There is a whole history here that we need not go into that goes back to the bankrolling of the Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War, which is often forgotten here, but they remember. A security agreement was reached between Iran and Saudi Arabia under President Khatami. That, with a fair wind, could be restored.

I would make two other points. There are presidential elections next May in Iran. I think President Rouhani is likely to be allowed to be a candidate by the Council of Guardians, but it is by no means certain that he will win. There should be no outside interference with the Iranians, which they would never appreciate, but we need to ensure that actions we are taking assist the relatively moderate forces of President Rouhani, rather than undermine them.

My last point is on how we achieve this. Critically, we have to work very closely with the French and the Germans. What became the JCPOA started off as a trilateral initiative of the three then Foreign Ministers of France, Germany and the UK—Dominique de Villepin, Joschka Fischer and me—back in 2003, facing quite a lot of hostility from elements of the American Government. Donald Rumsfeld described it in rather fruity terms as a nuisance, and more. It worked. Post-Brexit, paradoxically it is even more important that we develop a close foreign policy alliance with France and Germany, not less.

The Chairman: Almost everybody on the Committee wants to ask you a question.

Q92 **Lord Grocott:** My question relates back to Israel-Palestine. Your very helpful lecture obviously predates our Committee, but it speaks precisely to our remit on a whole range of issues. On Israel-Palestine, you are suggesting a more robust approach from the West. You are saying that if policies relating to goods from the settlements or even involving the withdrawal of ambassadors do not work in changing Israeli policy towards settlement activity, then we should be ready to consider other measures to bring home to the Israeli Government that their actions are wholly unjustified. I want to know what other measures you suggest.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Obviously that was written while President Obama was in power. There was no anticipation of the election of President Trump. At the moment, Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli Government can do anything. They basically suit themselves about what they do. They know that they suffer no penalty at all. At the same time, the Israelis are very sensitive to matters of international isolation. For example, commendably, under Lord Hague some changes were made by the EU over research arrangements. That really stung the Israelis. Those measures need to be considered. Sometimes, in response to an acute crisis, there can be withdrawal of ambassadors, but it is easier said than done. If that did not work, other measures would include, for example, the downgrading of relations between major countries and the Government of Israel. I have never believed that it is sensible, in respect of any Government, to abandon diplomatic relations, because you need to talk to them, but these things sting. It is about trying to influence Israeli politics as well. Many people far more expert than I argue that in the longer term this policy of doing nothing will not work to the Israelis' advantage, as well as, patently, the Palestinians'.

Q93 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** I would feel awkward calling you Mr Straw, so Jack.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Call me whatever you want.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I will leave that to others. I am trying to discern from your speeches, which we have read, and your contribution today this question of a commercial and economic relationship with Iran. Of course there are benefits to Britain of developing relationships, but am I correct in assuming that your argument is at least partly that they have enormous short-term political advantages to us in the sense of underpinning those forces and people inside Iran who would wish to develop at least a *modus vivendi* with the West, and in the longer term that it would help, through the development of economic forces in Iran itself, to set the material basis on which some progress towards their form of democracy might be better achieved?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: That is a very good summary, if I may say so, Lord Reid. It is worth bearing in mind that Iran is middle-income country. When you go there, Tehran feels like Madrid, or slightly better than Athens these days, with apologies to the Greeks. It does not feel like a Middle Eastern country or, say, Mumbai. It is a highly educated and young population. They are very devout—that includes younger people, so you cannot dismiss that—but they are also western-leaning. Their whole history is from the west, the north and directly to the east. It is not from the south at all. It is a huge potential market for us. If we are able, with European partners, to increase trade and investment and to normalise relations, that would have quite big political consequences. The reverse is also true. One of the criticisms that is made continually by the hard-line press in Iran is that the Iranian Government has “humiliated” itself by signing what the Iranians call in Farsi the BARJAM,⁸ and they have got nothing back. That is not true, but that is the criticism. We need to make sure that they get back more than they have so far received.

Q94 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** Following on from the issues about Iran, you said that we should not see Iran-Saudi relations as being zero-sum. That position might not be seen in quite the same way in Saudi, or at least that is how it is perceived externally. Going back to Lord Jopling’s question, are we not trying to ride both horses at the same time if we say we can see a market, or are we suggesting that we can sell arms to Saudi, but we would sell other things to Iran?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: With respect, Lady Smith, what I said is that my view is that we should not see relations between Iran and Saudi, from our point of view, as a zero-sum game. Why should we? There is no prospect of selling arms to the Iranians for many decades, so leave that aside. I am well aware of the depth of our defence relationship with Saudi, on which many hundreds of jobs of my former constituents in Blackburn depended. I do not dismiss that relationship for a second.

First, we want to establish a foreign policy that is in our interests. In my view, improving relations with Iran is very much in our interests, which is why we signed up to the joint comprehensive agreement,

⁸ The Persian acronym for the JCPOA

notwithstanding some hostility from the Saudis. Secondly, as I said, underneath the rhetoric—'twas ever thus in the Middle East—there is a different kind of reality in terms of relations between the Emirates and Iran at a commercial level. In the last couple of weeks the Saudis themselves have indicated that they do not see relations as a zero-sum. They have just made this incredibly important agreement with the Iranians on oil—and the Iranians were the back marker in getting agreement. That is my view about this. In the longer term, it is in the Saudis' interests to see the development of, if you like, a more normal kind of democracy in Iran and the power of the non-democratic state reduced. The current strategy of the British Government—backed, I think, by all parties—is towards that aim. I think we would be undermining our own interests if we were to change that.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: For the sake of argument, if we take as a given your point of view, which I happen to share, that it is not a zero-sum game between Saudi and Iran, that it is not in Britain's interests nor in those of Saudi Arabia or Iran that we should have a kind of Thirty Years' War with the two facing off against each other all over the region, first, how do you move towards a better situation? Secondly, where is "there"?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Moving to a better situation requires a settlement of the acute conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which is where I began. In Syria, I suspect that that will happen. It will happen very much on President Assad's, the Russians' and the Iranians' terms, but there we are. In Yemen, it requires more pressure, particularly from the major arms suppliers—the United States and the United Kingdom—on the Saudis to try to reach an agreement, and in turn, by the Iranians and Russians on the Houthis. It is clearly difficult and, as in any conflict where you have innocent people on both sides being slaughtered in considerable numbers, achieving this becomes more difficult, but at some stage, like in the Thirty Years' War, there will be a resolution. We just have to try to make sure that it is not in 30 years' time. Personally, I do not support the British Government's policy of what amounts to active involvement in Yemen. It is hard to see how this is going to end in a satisfactory way.

When I was in Oman about a year ago, it was striking to hear very senior Omanis—after all, they share a border with Yemen, so they are not detached from this—be so critical of the "Yemen adventure", as they described it. They said, "Yes, it is true that the Saudis are supporting one side and the Iranians are supporting the other, but it is much more complicated than that". Although the Houthis are Shia, they are Seveners, not Twelvers. These are differences that matter. It is a complicated tribal society. Just thinking that you could bomb part of that society into agreement is at best naive.

You asked about "there", Lord Hannay. "There" is to get to a modicum of stability. This is a highly turbulent region. The idea that suddenly all those complicated societies and conflicts are going to be resolved and be

on the sunlit uplands is nonsense, but you could get to a better level of stability, as has existed in the past.

The Chairman: Britain has been deeply involved in this region for well over 100 years. You have been describing, as a statesman, what we should do next. But should we really continue to do so much? Should we be involved? Lady Hilton has a question on that.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: Yes, you pre-empted my first sentence.

The Chairman: Oh, I am sorry, I always do that. Terrible, I apologise.

Q95 **Baroness Hilton of Eggardon:** It is an area where we have had a great deal of influence over the past century. Presumably, that has to some extent diminished due to various natural causes but also of course our own actions in the region—attacking Iraq, for example. How much do you think we still have influence or does this vary from country to country, rather than being all over the Middle East, as it was in the past?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: It varies very much from country to country. Of course, as with any other country, the present and the future are partly determined by history. I do not think we should eschew our history. Among other things, it gives us very strong commercial links, especially with the Gulf States, with which we have substantial trading relations and much else besides. It also gives us an understanding of the region. Although there have been unfortunate budget cuts at the Foreign Office, it still has a high level of expertise on the Middle East and very distinguished linguists. If we are going to remain members of the permanent five of the Security Council, we have responsibilities. I think we should pursue an active foreign policy in that region and do it, so far as we can, with France and Germany—and, yes, if we can get the United States alongside us, that is good, but we should not be dependent on the United States.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: Do you think that our policy should be driven largely by commercial interests or—you will have heard some of the argument earlier—should we be more value-driven, with our foreign policy based more on principle rather than purely commercial interests?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Foreign policy ought to have values behind it, of course, not be based just on vulgar short-term considerations of realpolitik, because such considerations normally lead the policy to run into the buffers. Commercial considerations are one factor. In any case, and going back to what I said about Iran, if you improve trade, you can often see a gradual easing of relations in other respects as well because it improves communication. These are not completely separate stovepipes. I also think that we should maintain a security presence there. We are famously the fifth-largest economy in the world and still have very substantial defence forces and I certainly do not subscribe to the view that we should abandon all that for soft power. For soft power to be most effective, you need the potential of hard power behind it.

The Chairman: What do you mean by “maintain a security presence”?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Within the Gulf, not least to ensure that oil tankers can move around, so that there can be no blockade; we should continue with our partners to patrol the Horn of Africa against all sorts of piracy. We have a responsibility for that, in my view, and, in terms of the free movement of tankers within the Gulf, a plain strategic interest.

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: But you have just been voicing doubts about Saudi Arabia in relation to Yemen.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Yes, but I am not saying that because we should maintain a security interest we should intervene on one side or the other in every conflict. I am not suggesting that at all.

The Chairman: Of course, America looms over all this. They must be having the same debate there. Lord Hannay.

Q96 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I know that this is a difficult moment to try to say what the Trump presidency's approach will be. We will know a little more when the nominees have been through their Senate procedures and things like that—

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Inshallah.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: —and the President has made his inaugural speech. But there seem to be rather a lot of ways in which our policy, as currently constructed anyway, diverges from the probable Trump policy. The Iran nuclear deal is one of them, which we have talked about. There are others, such as the way in which any rapprochement with Russia could impact on Syria, and the language that President-elect Trump uses towards Muslims generally. These are all pretty worrying things. Is that likely to lead, as I think you suggested, to the UK working more with France and Germany and less in lockstep with the United States than in the past? How would that affect our ability to exert influence in the region?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: I think it may. Like you, Lord Hannay, I think none of us can predict the precise course of the Trump foreign policy. Even since he was elected there have been some surprises, as his statement on his commitment to resolve the Israel-Palestine question illustrates. However, from what we know now, this is going to be a very different Republican presidency from any that we have seen in the past, certainly in the post-war period. Taking the period that I know best, President Bush had a very acute understanding of foreign policy and in both Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice he had people of huge experience, who understood international affairs, not least the Middle East. We did not always agree with them, but we worked extremely hard with the Americans to agree a common approach. I hope that that will be the case.

We certainly should not start from a position of aiming for disagreement with the Americans—far from it—but there are going to be some difficulties. For example, on the nuclear deal with Iran, I hope that the British Government will follow the position that Lord Hague adopted,

where he made it clear that even if the United States were to take a different view, the United Kingdom would stick to that agreement. I do not know whether he has said this in any other context, but when I interviewed Lord Hague for a radio programme I made last December, called "Bridging the Gulf with Tehran", he said that in terms. It will make for difficulties with Washington but, coming back to your point, the more we are able to develop a common approach with France and Germany, the stronger our voice will be in Washington—and I would not leave out other countries with which we are natural allies.

There are other potential rubbing points. When Mr Trump did this press conference about Israel and Palestine on 22 November, he did not mention his plan to shift the United States embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. If he were to do that, the fat would be in the fire. I hope that he will back off from that. I do not think that he has any understanding of the impact that that apparently simple move would have across the region. I do not want to sound condescending, but we have quite a job of education to do in Washington.

- Q97 **Lord Jopling:** Within the past two weeks, our Foreign Secretary made a speech in which he said that "it is Britain that insists on our resolve to enforce sanctions against Russia for their occupation of Crimea and their hand in the war against eastern Ukraine". I know that that is to do with Ukraine and Crimea, but it has an impact on the Middle East, yet the new nominee for Secretary of State in Washington has questioned sanctions. This frightens the life out of me—does it frighten the life out of you?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: It does not frighten the life out of me. If the United States were to abandon sanctions, that would raise a very large question about whether the European Union, which includes the United Kingdom, could continue with them. I publicly supported the use of sanctions against Russia over its acquisition of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. I am slightly ambivalent about it. I do not remotely support either of these but the European Union did not handle itself with glory in the run-up to the Russians' military action in eastern Ukraine, and the negotiations over the EU association agreement with Ukraine were cack-handed in the extreme. If you contrast that, for example, with the similar agreement that was made between the European Union and Kazakhstan, the contrast is really stark because the Kazakhs, who share a border with Russia and are alive to the Russian issue, made sure, and so did the European Union, that Moscow was kept informed in real time about the terms of the agreement, so the Russians were relaxed about it. There was a determination, partly assisted by the then Government in Kiev, to exclude Russia as though Russia had no interest in this, but of course it did. It had commercial interests and all sorts of other things.

If I were Foreign Secretary, I would sit down with colleagues in government and say, "We have had these sanctions for a certain period. What has been achieved by them?" We may come to the view that we should continue with them, but we may come to the view that their time has expired and we should seek a way through them without giving "direct victory" to President Putin. For sure, Britain's influence and foreign

policy are better if we can have better relations with Russia, which we did for quite a period. Notwithstanding the Iraq war, relations were relatively straightforward and continued to be so until the Russians felt that their co-operation on the Security Council resolution on Libya had been abused.

The Chairman: In some ways, the arrival of Mr Trump and, indeed, the Brexit phenomenon might open up new opportunities to have less of a “Me, too” policy with America and the possibility to develop our own networks and interests in different ways. I notice that the Foreign Secretary said that the era of abandoning east of Suez was over. Does this herald a whole new era of involvement in the radically changed Middle East that we are now looking at?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: I neither wished us to leave the European Union nor, frankly, had I been an American voter would I have voted for Donald Trump. But there we are: both sets of events have happened and we have to deal with them. If Hillary Clinton had been elected President, there would not have been an issue about whether we continue to co-operate with the United States, because broadly its foreign policy would have been in line with ours, and vice versa. Given that these are matters of fact, we have to seize the opportunities that are there. I am happy to send the Committee, if it is not overburdened with lectures of mine, a recent lecture, which I gave to the Defence Academy in Shrivenham last Tuesday—

The Chairman: Yes, we have it.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: —about how we handle foreign policy in the new circumstances.

Q98 **The Chairman:** I have one more question about America; this is a bit of history. When Parliament here voted down the Government’s wish in 2013 for more military action against Assad, I think you joined in voting that down—maybe with some doubts, but you did—and America appeared to follow on. Was that a happy sequence of events that you still think was right?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: I think that I made the right decision. I spoke in the debate. I think that everybody, including our then leader Ed Miliband and Douglas Alexander, was wracked about the decision, but I think that we came to the right decision. I noticed this morning on the radio that Crispin Blunt, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Commons, was saying similar things. The problem with that proposal was that it was not properly prepared. It really was not. President Obama, you may recall, said that his proposed action would be a “shot across the bow” of the Assad regime, which was revealing but an extraordinary analogy to use, because shots across the bow are not designed to cause any damage.

The stated military aim of that action was to end Assad’s use of chemical weapons. I was very unclear about how, from the air, you could remove a

chemical weapons arsenal—how do you do that? No one was suggesting that we put ground troops in afterwards but, given that no one was suggesting that, the next question was: so you bomb various bases; with luck you pick the “right” bases, not the wrong ones, but there is no way of knowing; what happens then?

It is said that this action would have weakened Assad, which it might have done, but it would also have had consequences for the involvement of the Russians and the Iranians, who would not have just sat back and done nothing. It was all done in haste, do you remember? We were going to come back to Parliament the following week but suddenly on 29 August we were told that it was absolutely vital to turn up that day to vote on this very ill-thought-through proposal. If there had been more time and some of the questions about what was going to happen next had been resolved, it might have gone through, but it was one of the least well-prepared proposals for military action that I can think of for a very long time. That was why it failed.

Q99 Lord Inglewood: You have almost covered the point that I was going to raise. We have talked about countries such as Turkey and Iran perhaps playing a bigger role in trying to stabilise the region. I think that your view is that they could. In the real world, is there anything we might do to assist that and act as a kind of honest broker or mediator to get that process under way?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: I declare an interest as co-chairman of the British-Turkish Forum, which is backed by both Governments. The situation in Turkey is very difficult at the moment and has been since the 15 July attempted coup. I do not think anybody—the wider public and probably most Members of Parliament, at either end—fully understands the extent of the trauma of that attempted coup on 15 July. It killed about 240 people, injured very many, and came very close to being successful. Had it not been for the pure chance of the chief of the defence staff, who was not part of the coup, being alerted by a pilot questioning why he was required to go from Istanbul to Ankara that evening when he had the weekend off, the coup would have taken place not at 9.30 pm but at 3 am, when it would almost certainly have succeeded. All sorts of things have followed from that.

My view, and I think that this is the view of the British Government, is that although the consequences are very difficult and some people have criticised President Erdoğan for his “overreaction”, we need to stay close to the Turkish people and the Turkish Government and do our best to influence them from within a close relationship, not shouting from the side.

Relations between Turkey and Iran are interesting—I gave a lecture about that, too; you may have it. Despite the fact that they are Sunni and Shia and so on, they have managed to co-exist pretty well along a border that has not changed for centuries. They have always avoided any direct conflict. My estimation is that they will carry on doing that. They are potential rivals and partners but there is huge trade across the

border. They have a shared interest in not seeing the Kurds suddenly erupt and challenge international borders.

A quarter of Iranians—the Azeri Iranians—speak a Turkic language. Former President Gül said to me quite recently that he always found it very easy to talk to the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, because he was basically an Azeri so he was talking Turkish. Underneath this confessional divide, there is a lot of common interest. I do not think we need to be an honest broker—nor do I think we could be—between Iran and Turkey, except that the more we are able to build up relations with Iran, the more we can influence Iran bilaterally and through that its co-operation with Turkey. Turkey is going through a difficult period but it will stabilise in due course. If these two countries were able to work together on foreign policy issues, they could be quite influential. It is worth bearing in mind that, while this continues to be a factor, the Saudis and most of the Gulf states—not all of them—actively supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, and Saudi bankrolled Saddam. The Turks stood back from that and maintained good relations with Iran during that terrible conflict.

The Chairman: Finally, because we have kept you a long time, we are talking about whether the region can look after itself or whether the involvement of the great powers over the past couple of hundred years should continue in a new form. Lady Coussins.

Q100 **Baroness Coussins:** You have talked about British policy and the British role within various individual countries in the region, but what is your assessment of the UK's capacity to exert influence on the international stage, when you take into account the different and evolving roles of Russia, China and the US, not to mention our own situation post-Brexit? There are quite a few unknowns there which we might have to just make educated guesses about. How well positioned do you think the UK is to exercise influence at an international level? How would you advise us to nurture and calibrate diplomacy to fit in with that vision?

Rt Hon Jack Straw: First, we have to accept certain realities. We do not have the military capacity—and we are not going to—of the United States, China or, indeed, Russia. This is despite the fact that in nominal terms Russia's economy is the same size as Spain's. It has three times the population but it made a strategic decision to spend an awful lot of its wealth and income on military strength and the projection of power. That said, the region will continue to affect international relations for a whole variety of reasons, including the fact that this is where most of the world's hydrocarbons come from. However green you are, we are going to be dependent on hydrocarbon resources into the distant future. The fact that all those economies are so vulnerable to shifts in the oil price makes them sensitive to factors in the international economy.

At the risk of repeating myself, how do we handle the situation? First, we should have confidence in our potential role and our diplomatic and military ability. We are the fifth-largest economy and the fifth-largest defence spender. We are down the ranks in absolute terms but we are still significant. We have this critical responsibility as a permanent

member of the Security Council. I assume that we will want to maintain that. There are historic reasons why we do. How do we handle it? We need to strengthen our diplomacy, not just its quality but its quantity, because, among other things, we will need to strengthen our diplomatic presence in the capitals of EU member states because so much has been done in Brussels or between capitals. If that means diverting some of the money that we currently spend on aid to sensible diplomacy, I absolutely support that, because there is the prospect of being caught in the headlights by the 0.7%; I am sceptical about how a lot of it is spent. Then we need to build up alliances, as I say, particularly with France and Germany. The reality has always been that an EU foreign policy exists only if France, Germany and the United Kingdom agree it. That will be so in the future.

The Chairman: Mr Straw, there are about 1,000 other questions that we would like to ask you. We are reminded of the adage that everything in the Middle East connects to everything else. Wherever we turn, there are twists and turns. You have been very frank and illuminating about the future and, indeed, bits of the past as well. We greatly value what you have said. We are very grateful to you for coming before us this morning.

Rt Hon Jack Straw: Thank you very much indeed.