



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Wednesday 22 February 2017

10.45 am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Lord Inglewood; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 15

Heard in Public

Questions 172 - 182

Witnesses

[I](#): Mr Daniel Levy, President, US-Middle East Project.

[II](#): Mr Tom Fletcher CMG, Former UK Ambassador to Lebanon (via videolink)

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Mr Daniel Levy.

Q172 **The Chairman:** Thank you very much for coming before us this morning. You and I have met before and have had fascinating conversations in the past. Now we want to share more of your wisdom on aspects of the issues we are discussing. The Committee is looking at a rather broad canvas: the changing structure of power in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli and Israel-Palestine issues are obviously a central part of this, as they have been all along, but there are all kinds of new currents running. This is where we want you to share your thoughts on how these could be affecting the scene.

To start from the daily newspaper angle, out of Washington have come suggestions that the new President is not so keen on the two-state solution. Then it turns out that this may, after all, be fake news and he did not really mean what he said. There is a slight feeling that after years of relative deadlock, there may be some new aspects to look at and alternative approaches. If so, what would they be, in your view? It is very puzzling for us.

Daniel Levy: Thank you for inviting me to be a witness before the Committee. The attempts to portray the new Administration as radically different might be premature. The attempts afterwards to suggest that this Administration was more or less going to be in the groove of all previous Administrations might also be premature. What I see out of Washington so far—it is early days and they do not have the full team in place—looks a bit to me like more of the same but less, with a couple of caveats.

The United States is clearly the unique player that could have the leverage to move Israel in a direction towards ending the occupation and getting two states, should it so choose. It has chosen not to do so in the past. That has cut across different Administrations, Presidents and parties for reasons that are manifold and certainly connected to domestic American politics. If this Administration are going to be about trying to achieve a similar result but with even less willingness to assert themselves and to push the parties—in this respect the Israeli party in particular—I do not think there is much prospect of things happening.

There are two potential caveats to mention at this stage. In response to President Trump saying, “Two states, one state. I thought two states would be easier, but I’ll go with whatever the parties prefer, whatever Israelis and Palestinians can agree to”, most of the commentariat has suggested that that was rookie unfamiliarity with the complexities of the conflict, which may well be the case. There is another way of interpreting it, which I will share with you—I am not sure I agree with it. This could have been unintentional, but it becomes significant. There are not many ways to grab the Israelis’ attention and drive a different debate in Israel. There is one that I think we all want to make sure will not happen, although if things stay the same there is an inevitability to it, which is

violence. Another is a kind of sanctioning that would cause the Israelis to say, "Okay, there's a cost to these settlements, to this occupation. Maybe we have to make the choice that we have thus far sought to avoid and decide what will be the fate of these territories". But there might be a third thing that can grab Israelis' attention, which is if they feel they have the possibility of a one-state outcome, having made it so difficult to achieve two states, for many Israelis that victory would also be a defeat, because they do not want to have one shared democratic space with the Palestinians. It could be that by elevating these two options you let loose a much healthier debate inside Israel.

Paradoxically for Prime Minister Netanyahu, the fact is that if you see an Administration who appear to run to his right and almost to align with his more hard-line coalition allies, that could be a headache for him, not because he necessarily disagrees with them in long-term strategy, the position of which is to prevent Palestinian sovereignty and a genuine Palestinian state predicated on de-occupation and ending Israeli control. But the tactics differ greatly.

I think Netanyahu's tactic is to continue to suggest that they are ready for peace while making the conditions impossible and making the realities on the ground ever less amenable to two states. His opponents in his party want a different tactic, which is perhaps the majority of his parliamentary party and certainly includes important coalition allies such as the Jewish Home party, have a more triumphalist position: "We have won. There will not be a Palestinian state. We even have an ally in Washington now willing to contemplate this outcome. Therefore, let's get on with it". Their position is to annex formally more and more of the territory. There are different plans as to how one would do that. In a way, if the Trump Administration stick to this line and say, "You guys decide. Do you want two states or one?", it could lead to that argument coming to the fore in Israel and for those who believe in one state to further lose their restraint in making that case. It could lead the two-state camp to have a bit of a re-emergence. You do not have an opposition owning the two-state alternative in an assertive way. Maybe this will come full circle. I just put that out there as one way of seeing President Trump's comments as a bit of smart disruption, rather than flailing.

The other idea that people are kicking around, which I do not think is new and I do not think will get us anywhere on the Palestine issue, is this notion of what people have called "outside in". Previously the idea was that if the Israelis and Palestinians could reach a deal, that would pave the way to a whole set of relations between Israel and the Arab world that are impossible to advance in the open in the absence of progress or peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The idea that is talked about more now than in the past is that, with the shared antipathy to Iran, with priorities having been recalibrated on that front and others, and with Israel having closer albeit still quiet relations with key Gulf states for instance, perhaps by building this outer envelope of relations you can create the reassurances that allow the Palestinians to be part of

a larger package deal. That has been tried on and off for the past several years. It was something Senator Mitchell tried when he was special envoy; it was something Secretary Kerry tried. Information even came out last week about a summit held last year in Aqaba, Jordan, where this approach was tried.

Personally, I think that something else is going on, which is that the Israeli side is testing the hypothesis of how far they can go in their relations with certain Arab states without having to concede anything on the Palestinians. That is the game that is really in play here. I think the Prime Minister of Israel feels that he has perhaps managed to go further than he imagined he might be able to, and perhaps with some support from Washington he wants to test how much further he can go. I think that will come up against real limitations; there will only be so far that countries in the region can go if there is a continued impasse on the Palestinian front.

The Chairman: But does not all this new thinking come up against the single concrete block that, for the Palestinians, nothing less than a separate Palestinian state will do? This has been their central mission, one hope and absolute objective all the way along. Maybe other Arab countries take a more relaxed view, but is anything going to move that basic Palestinian view? Therefore, can anything move in the direction of any of these new thoughts?

Daniel Levy: Of course, the original Palestinian national movement had as its position a secular, democratic state in all historical Palestine. The PLO formalised the adoption of two states only in 1988, and it accepted a Palestinian state on 22% of historical Palestine along the 1967 lines. That has now taken root as very much the unshakeable position of this generation of Palestinian leadership. They have staked everything on achieving Palestinian statehood along those lines. There is no suggestion that this generation of Palestinian leaders is going to change.

One has to appreciate that there is a deep nationalism on both sides of this equation. The Israelis are deeply nationalist about the idea of a Jewish state. For the Palestinians to have gone on this journey and never to realise a moment of Palestinian self-determination is a problematic leap of faith for them to make. However, if one speaks to the younger generation of Palestinians, there is an increasing almost giving up on the idea that much is to be gained by continuing to pursue a state. They do not believe that they will ever really have a sovereign state, so among younger Palestinians there is increasing traction for the idea of a civil rights struggle. This summer, Israel will have been there for 50 years—it is 50 years since the 1967 occupation. The Israelis are clearly not going anywhere; none of these settlements are going anywhere. The Palestinian Authority have not made a fantastic fist of self-governance—not that the conditions were fantastic for the Palestinian Authority—so why not? Perhaps a potentially more successful struggle would be the struggle for equal rights: “The Israelis are here, they are not going anywhere, so give us the vote”.

If I look some years beyond the horizon, I think we will reach a moment when the Palestinian national position tips over into equal rights in one state, because two states will seem so impossible to achieve on the ground. The kinds of conditionalities that the Israelis would build into it would be so unattractive. Factor in one other thing: we are focusing on the Palestinians in the territories themselves, but the Palestinian body politic—the organs of the PLO at least; not of the Authority, which is just on the ground in the territories, but the organs of the larger national movement—is constituted by representatives of the diaspora. For the diaspora, that goal of a limited state on just 22% was never that attractive when the PLO made that switch in 1988. This goes back to my original point that, for the Israelis, the one thing that shakes them out of the attitude of, “We don’t have to choose. We can have our cake and eat it”, is the real threat of a civil rights struggle.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Could you say something about the Israeli Arabs, who you have not factored into this? Presumably, particularly in the circumstances you are suggesting and in the direction you suggest the debate might be moving, they will become somewhat more important, not as a separate factor but presumably in a single state in which the Palestinian citizens have equal rights. The political dynamics would then become completely different, because the two populations, the West Bank and Israel, are now roughly, if I understand it rightly, even-stevens; they are 6:6, I think. Could you comment on that?

Daniel Levy: That is a very important point. Just under 20% of the population of Israel as recognised on the 1967 lines is Palestinian Arab. One of the leading Palestinian-Arab members of the Knesset, Ahmad Tibi, has this very acute phrase: “If you continue to stay there and if one implements the plans of the far right of one greater Israel, it will be Tibi, not Bibi, who is Prime Minister, because I’ll have the votes”. By the way, the Israeli President, President Rivlin, is on record supporting one democratic state. For him it will still be a Jewish state. He has not yet wrapped his head around what it means if the numbers are equal. Those numbers, by the way, are equal if you include Gaza, and there is a strong sense in Israel that disconnecting from the two-state option is also about pushing Gaza on to a very reluctant Egypt—that Gaza is ultimately Egypt’s problem, not Israel’s, and is not part of the overall Palestinian situation.

The Palestinian Israelis have become more part of the Palestinian political mix in recent years. The PLO always represented all Palestinians, except those within Israel. That has always historically been an interesting anomaly, but there are increasing connections between those political blocs. In the last election, following a change in electoral law—Israel has a pure proportional representation system—the electoral threshold for getting into Parliament was raised in such a way that it looked as though three different Arab parties represented in the previous Knesset would not make it. In fact, many people attributed the whole rationale behind raising the threshold as trying to keep those parties out, given the party that brought forward that legislation. They came together in what was a

very politically tricky move, but they formed something called the Joint List. This made quite an impact on the Israeli scene, but also beyond on the Palestinian scene because it meant that Islamists, communists, nationalists and democrats were all in one party bloc. This happened, of course, at a time when the Palestinian political division between the nationalist Fatah and the Islamist Hamas was still as intense as ever. This was seen as a very positive signal.

The bottom line is that, yes, it would change their reality totally. They have become a more important player in the overall Palestinian political mix. They are largely ignored. The other thing that is important to note is that, like the rest of the Palestinian community, they are divided on this question. For some in the Arab community inside Israel, a two-state solution is absolutely the right way forward—there should be a separate Palestinian state. The positive scenario is that if you are in a reality that has gone beyond occupation, where Israeli-Arab relations have become much more normalised, their existence as citizens in Israel will become more normalised. Then there is a cohort within that community for whom one state is the obvious way forward and the only way they will ever really achieve full equality.

The Chairman: I have one further question on the US attitude to all this. Do you think that in his ruminations President Trump has the support of the traditional pro-Israeli lobby in America, which has always been regarded as hard line, with one or two deviations? I remember getting into a taxi in New York and the taxi man saying that Israel was their front line. Do you think that President Trump, with a son-in-law apparently assigned to look after this in particular, is now sensing that there is room for movement on the American side?

Daniel Levy: More movement in what respect?

The Chairman: In opening up this issue.

Daniel Levy: President Trump poses a real dilemma for the whole functioning of pro-Israel politics in the American Jewish community in the following way. Traditionally, the Jewish American community has overwhelmingly voted Democrat, which did not change this past November. It is ordinarily a 75:25 split, which, for the last three decades plus, has changed very little. But President Trump is far more of an anathema to a large swathe of the American Jewish community than previous Presidents. When Prime Minister Netanyahu endorsed Trump and his team as the greatest friends of the Jewish people and the Jewish state, that played incredibly badly with a large cross-section of American Jewry, for whom the alt-right phenomenon and Steve Bannon are a real problem. The closer Trump and Netanyahu appear to be, the greater the potential fissure between that community and Israel. In an unprecedented move, the largest denomination in American Jewry, the reform stream of Judaism, has come out against this chap David Friedman for the position of American ambassador to Israel.

In a way, AIPAC, the main lobby, is a little nervous, because the great success of the pro-Israel lobby has been its bipartisan nature; its ability to carry both parties on a set of positions that centred around—no surprises—solid support. You do not do too much to cross any Israeli Government of the day. That has become much harder to do after the taking of office of the new Administration. It had already become harder under the previous Administration when Netanyahu was playing ever more transparently in the domestic American political sandpit over the Iran deal. I might be extrapolating too far, but that is something to look out for on the horizon that might not survive four to eight years of this presidency.

The Chairman: Let us turn from the US to the UK.

Q173 **Lord Grocott:** Your observations are absolutely fascinating. I would perhaps like a slightly broader timescale perspective on how the diplomacy and the international relations of Israel have changed and moved over the last 30 or 40 years. A number of our witnesses have taken the view, which I think is a pretty general view, that not only are settlements and the development of settlement activity bad for achieving a two-state solution, but they are not very good news for the long-term security of Israel. I just wonder about your perception of this. Perhaps I am asking more about the perception in Israel. Certainly my political experience in Parliament here has been that there has been an inexorable shift from almost unqualified support and understanding of the Israeli position to one that is not quite at the other end of the scale but is certainly one of far more understanding of and sympathy for the Palestinians' failure to obtain a state or even to stop the settlement activity. If I am right, is that a factor at all in Israeli thinking and foreign policy? I might be wrong, but if I am right it seems that, inexorably, world opinion has made Israel more and more isolated during this period. Is that right?

Daniel Levy: First, let me align myself with those who have argued that the settlements are more of a security burden than a security asset for Israel. One of the fascinating tensions in Israel today is between the political leadership and the security establishment. I will not bore you too much with the minutiae of the internal party primary systems on the Israeli right, but as the political leadership is seen to go ever more in the direction of doing things that appeal to an ever narrower cohort of primary voters and doing things that are ever more out there on the pro-settlement side—I do not know whether people noticed the Bill that passed a couple of weeks ago legalising essentially the theft of Palestinian private property, which by Israeli standards is a leap into uncharted territory—the security establishment is worried. It knows that unless you give the Palestinians some breathing space, some political horizon, including in Gaza, that makes its job of providing security for Israelis that much more difficult.

Nevertheless, Israel has gone on this political journey where the right finds itself very politically self-confident. I say that because the way Israelis have experienced the phenomenon that you described of the

trajectory of UK politics in the last 30 years is as follows. They have heard the international community, their closest trade partners, those with whom they deal most often—in Europe, and in the US under the Obama Administration, previously under the Clinton Administration, and even at certain moments under Bush 43—expressing ever more anxiety over Israeli policies, and they have been told domestically, “Any moment now this will be painful. We’ll be isolated. We’ll have pariah status. This will cost us”.

However, the reality they experienced was that while the rhetoric escalated, the practical upshot of that international opprobrium was almost zero. Israel saw in its global relations that those who condemned settlements on Mondays and Wednesdays were expanding their trade, scientific, military intelligence, technology and sport co-operation with Israel on Tuesdays and Fridays. So it began to wear a bit thin on the Israeli public. Perhaps the exaggerated self-confidence and the overreach of the hardliners has now gone too far the other way and they now feel that the evidence is on their side and that it does not matter, because the world has a bark but not a bite. That is how it is experienced in Israel. For some, the argument is still made that, “You’re misreading this”, that it is the frog in the vat of boiling water: the temperature is going up incrementally, then eventually you are simply boiled and you will not have noticed.

The other thing that has happened at the same time, of course—it began with Oslo, but in the absence of progress on Oslo it has continued—is that Israel has expanded its world of connections. In Asia, Israel has good relations with Russia. Israel was very careful not to take a position on the Ukraine and Crimea conflict. Despite the closeness to America, the Israelis did everything they could to avoid being at UN votes in the General Assembly, et cetera. Israel has quiet relationships with the Arab states, closer relations than ever with Egypt under President Sisi and very strong relations with Jordan. Although Israel cannot replace its relations with America and Europe, it has also diversified.

Lord Grocott: Following on from that, maybe this can be raised at the quartet, where Britain’s position will, of course, change post Brexit. What is your assessment of the effectiveness or otherwise of the quartet, and what position do you imagine Britain might usefully adopt—

The Chairman: If you do not mind, Lord Grocott, we will come to the quartet in a moment. You are quite right that it follows, but Lord Hannay wanted to ask a question.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I would like to follow up on the last thing that Lord Grocott said. British foreign policy will be formulated at some point in the future outside the framework of the European Union. Do you think it would be sensible for this country to follow the possibly extremely erratically meandering path of President Trump, clinging on, as closely as possible, to each of his zig-zags in the Middle East, which seems likely? Or, if the other Europeans dig in on behalf of the two-state solution and the Arab approach of however many years ago, where do you think the

balance of advantages and considerations for the British Government lie?

Daniel Levy: I will take my lead from the phrasing of the question. It is not just that I do not think that Britain will cloak itself in glory if it adheres to those meanderings. I very much question whether that will serve the British national and security interests. It is easy to be reminded of this when it is 100 years since Balfour, but Britain has a unique responsibility when it comes to this issue. Much as other issues have dominated the headlines in the Middle East for the last half-decade at least, it would be a mistake to dismiss the notion that Palestine is still a rallying cry, still has an iconic meaning and is still pointed to as a very important and legitimate grievance in how the Middle East is treated by the West. Britain should not volunteering to put itself front and centre of a more problematic policy that takes its lead from Washington, even if it has the support of some of the regimes in the Middle East. At the popular level and among those who will use whatever tools they can to radicalise and recruit that should not be an excuse for not doing the right thing - but if it is also doing the wrong thing, that should certainly factor into one's thinking.

For me, it is a bit of an "if" as to whether the Europeans can hold a line on this, because that is so difficult to do in the 28 collective when, to be very frank, it makes perfect sense from the Israeli perspective to make sure that a couple of EU member states are willing to do their bidding—and, in a way, credit should be given to the Israelis for managing to pull this off. Those member states can be more rightist central or eastern European that ~~were~~ have perhaps bought into notions of a world Jewish conspiracy but that believe the Israelis can help them in some other ways. Sometimes they can help them practically. Recently it was the far-left Government of Greece who prevented a set of Council conclusions, because they had a particularly good gas deal that they were on the verge of securing with the Israelis. So it is hard to keep a solid European line, but if what one sees out of Washington is indeed a meandering, erratic, unhelpful, unconstructive, peace-negating position on this, I think Britain would be ill advised to align with it. If we end up aligning with that at the UN, it will hasten what will in any case be question marks regarding our P5 status.

One thing I would draw to the Committee's attention that I think will be an early test case for where Britain aligns itself was highlighted in the reports and official statements of the visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu to this country just two or three weeks ago. If indeed Britain is going to negotiate a new trade arrangement with Israel quickly post Brexit, will that adhere to the existing European position, which is that when one trades with Israel one trades with the Israel that is recognised internationally, not beyond the green line? In other words, no settlements, settlement products or anything that can legally benefit from free trade arrangements. Or is one going to do what the Americans are trying to push? Formally, that is also what the American trade arrangements with Israel say, but there is an attempt to muddy that and have what they call no discrimination against "Israel or the territories it

controls”, which is not a very sophisticated euphemism for the settlements. Britain will have to make that choice. That will be an important early indicator.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: But not for two years.

Daniel Levy: No. At the moment, Britain is playing a blocking role in the EU on this issue. Britain decided to take a very degrading, dismissive attitude to the Paris conference earlier this year. It was not going to bring peace, but I do not think there was a need for Britain to do that. Apparently that was at the behest of Washington. I am not sure that it earns us any greater respect in Washington when we prostrate ourselves in that way. Britain was a key player in blocking Council conclusions, because it lends weight. There is only so often that the Romanians and the Hungarians will go out on a limb on this issue in the Foreign Affairs Council; they have other fish to fry. But if Britain is there aligning itself with them, it is very easy. Britain did that. Again, I do not see why alienating our allies/negotiating partners for a hard negotiation for the next two years on issues such as this by going against our own established policy anyway is going to be a smart way to conduct ourselves.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: That is very useful. To come back to the point that Lord Grocott made, with all that context, including our Prime Minister’s criticism of Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech, and the fact that it is UK humanitarian development assistance that is keeping Palestinians alive not only in the West Bank but in Lebanon, as I saw when I visited the ANERA camps in Lebanon last year, what can the UK bring to the situation? Is there a perception that we have a clear intention behind our position, or is there a perception that 2017 is a write-off because of the sensitivities of Balfour and we do not want to be involved too much because it is just too sensitive for UK foreign policy?

Daniel Levy: There is a European centre of gravity in the E3—the Germans, the Brits and the French—which, if acting in concert, can convey a message that can matter. This year especially, I do not think that the question will be asked—in different circumstances it might have been—whether the anniversary of Balfour is the correct occasion for recognising a Palestinian state. I tend to think that if, in these circumstances, one wants to keep a two-state option viable not only on the ground but in people’s minds and on the cognitive map that people have of this conflict, one probably needs to do more than what has been done so far.

There was a period under the last two or three Governments in which Britain took occasional steps that were not game-changing but which helped push the envelope. Britain was a leader in settlement product labelling, in putting out business advisory guidelines regarding corporate social responsibility and the risks of doing business with Israel in territories not recognised as Israeli and in business activities that were a violation of international law. Others have followed suit. So there are things that Britain could do to keep the notion of two states more salient.

The thing about aid to the Palestinians—the aid to UNRWA especially is very important—is that, in a way, it has become part of the fixtures and furnishings of the status quo. In a way we are now subsidising the occupation for the Israelis. The attempt to build a Palestinian authority as a state incubation project was predicated on making progress on having that state. The Oslo agreement stipulated that a final status deal had to be reached in five years. That was originally signed in 1993, but that particular implementation was in 1994. It expired in 1999. We are now 20-plus years into funding something that it is very hard with any credibility to claim is still building the apparatus of a Palestinian state when the ability to have that state is constantly undermined. At some stage there will have to be a rethink, and Britain could constructively be part of that rethink as an important aid donor, with the historic responsibility that it has, as a P5 member and as a country that is listened to in Israel.

Right now, the impression is that Britain is beginning to realign itself as a country that is basically saying to the Israelis, “Do what you like. You won’t have any problems with us, no matter how far you go in this relentless emaciation of the two-state option”. The thing to bear in mind is that the risk that the Israelis are taking, but that those who are going along with this are also taking, is that the relative ineffectiveness of the Palestinian leadership is a permanent given. It has to be recognised that they remain divided and have not really challenged the status quo in ways that are disruptive, which can be done non-violently. In what was described in terms of the politics here, it does not translate into the kind of constituency pressure that drives policy. However, I am not sure that that is a permanent given. We could see collapse and chaos when there is a Palestinian leadership transition, but something could also take its place that is far more challenging, including to the region, which is the other problem with taking this position. At the moment, for reasons of weakness but also because of the general situation in the region, you do not have a Palestinian leadership ability to embarrass the Arabs into doing certain things on the Palestinian issue, as Arafat used to be able to do. One should not assume that that is a permanent feature either.

Q174 Lord Reid of Cardowan: Thank you for your fascinating contributions. On the UK, the EU and Brexit, I take it from what you have said that the effect of the UK leaving the European Union, assuming Brexit goes through, will be to reduce what you called the blockage of a more critical EU position on Israel, because according to what you explained to us, Britain has certainly been perceived as being one of the blockages. Secondly, from the British point of view, it will no longer be part of the quartet, so what should the relationship be with the remaining European Union members on this subject after it has left?

Finally, you have stressed the dangers of the United Kingdom, in Europe or outside it, walking in the footsteps of the United States. What are the opposite risks and limitations of the UK following an independent policy from the United States?

Daniel Levy: Let me clarify something I said, which is that the UK acting as a blocker in the EU is of very recent vintage. The way it has played out recently is really a post-Trump phenomenon and apparently part of this ingratiation initiative. On a number of occasions, Britain was quite constructive in bringing an E3 consensus with France and Germany, or as a quint with the Spanish and Italians as well. Yes, you can always have one or two countries holding out and preventing something from being adopted, but, as I said, that is difficult to do month after month the FAC. Unfortunately, I do not think it will have a liberating effect. Britain playing the role it was traditionally playing will be lost. If Britain continues to play its current role, that is different.

The quartet is one of those creatures that has always had a lot more going for it in theory than in practice. On the very first occasion the quartet road map was introduced in 2003 or 2004, or even 2002, the Israelis refused to meet with the quartet as the quartet. It received the road map from the Americans. The Americans have seen the quartet as, "When it's useful, we'll be at it, but normally we do our thing, and if the quartet wants to endorse it ..." So I am not sure that we lose that much by not being part of the quartet. The theory of the potential is still there. For the EUHR on recent occasions, the quartet has been a useful vehicle for getting more face time with the American Secretary of State than one would otherwise get, but it has not been used as much more than that, because you would not want to shake things up as you might lose that extra vehicle for face time. So I am afraid that I am relatively scathing about the quartet.

One of the interesting things about the quartet, and there is not much that is interesting about it, was the initiative that the French took. In the absence of anything else going on, the French brought forward an eclectic mix of countries, some of which have not been traditionally involved. So that is always an option, and it is an option for Britain outside the EU.

There will be things that Britain can allow itself to do outside the EU, should it so choose on this and on other issues, that are more difficult to do when one is in that club of 28. We are not a Norway or a Switzerland. There are things that the Norwegians and the Swiss can allow themselves to do through a kind of back-channel diplomacy that I do not think we would do. Do we revisit our position on contacts with Hamas? There is no indication of that, although I think that would be a wise thing to do. I do not think that we or anyone, including the Israelis actually, benefit from the position that has been taken on Hamas, but I do not think that is something that we are going to do. Nothing will prevent us, on any number of issues, from continuing to work with important European partners.

The Chairman: Mr Levy, we must stop you there, I am afraid, because we are on a video timetable and we have one final question, from Lord Hannay. I will have to ask you to keep your answer pretty brief.

Q175 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** This question is about the salience of the Middle East peace process and the Palestinian issue in the wider region.

Perhaps up to a few weeks ago, the argument was that the salience had virtually disappeared and was not terribly likely to come back again; partly because of the chaos in the Middle East and partly of the failure to make any progress on the Middle East peace process, one would have said that that was the forecast. Could you comment on that and on whether President Trump's policies, particularly the possible move of the embassy to Jerusalem, are oddly enough likely to make the issue more salient than most of us thought it was going to be: i.e. exactly the opposite of what President Trump intends?

The Chairman: That is a big question. A short answer, please.

Daniel Levy: The short answer is that that is precisely why it is not very high on Prime Minister Netanyahu's list of priorities. The Palestinian issue has declined in salience except for when it re-emerges. Given that it has not gone away, and given the nature of developments there, it is highly unlikely that it will not periodically explode in our faces if we do not do something about it. Those explosions might be more or less dramatic and carry more or less consequence and regional drama with them, but I would just go back to the point that if one assumes that the Palestinians are now permanently unable to mobilise and generate support in the region, that is one reality. If one assumes that that is not a given, that it is a different reality. I would assume the latter. I think that the Israelis in that respect are unfortunately sometimes their own worst enemies, because they are always likely to generate a totally preventable crisis by overreach, by doing something egregious. The Jerusalem embassy has not moved thus far, and the indications are that it is not going to in a hurry. That is quite interesting in and of itself. You can imagine what has gone on in the security establishment in America over that.

The Chairman: Sadly, we are going to have to leave it there, with that thought about own worst enemies ringing in our ears. You have said many fascinating things. I should have said right at the beginning, but did not that, that this is a public session, there will be a transcript, and you will have a chance to change it as you wish later. All I can say now is that we would like to have another hour with you, but we cannot; we have a tight programme. We thank you very much indeed. We are most grateful.

Examination of witness (via videolink)

Mr Tom Fletcher.

Q176 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Mr Fletcher. I hope you can hear us here in the Committee. Are you getting some communication?

Tom Fletcher: Yes, thank you, you are clear.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for joining us this morning. We are most grateful to you. I am afraid that the communication system is not working perfectly. I hope all our words get through, but first, welcome.

Secondly, I make the routine observation that this session is public. A transcript will follow afterwards and there is a chance for you to change it as you want. You know all about that. Thirdly, this is part of a much broader inquiry. We are looking into the changing power structures of the Middle East and the implications for UK policy. The moving parts around us are moving very rapidly, not least in Washington and in the rest of the world. We would like to share your wisdom on a number of aspects on which you have spoken and written with great authority.

I begin with a broad question that you must have realised very closely, particularly during your time in Lebanon, where we met and talked several times. This is now a young Middle East. It is a vast region with more than half the people aged under 30. They are technologically mobilised with all sorts of old grievances coming to the fore. There is total turmoil and chaos in parts. It is a world in which the old policies of the last 50 or 100 years are clearly becoming redundant and obsolete. What are the main lines of our new response to the situation swirling around us in the Middle East? How can we contribute to it in a really constructive manner? Give us some broad thoughts on that.

Tom Fletcher: Thank you very much for the chance to join you. The audio is coming through loud and clear. You are quite heavily pixelated at that end, but that is not a problem. If I may I will start from a slightly surprising angle, given I have written a book about the future of diplomacy and how diplomacy is being changed by technology. I challenge two of the words in the question: "obsolete" and "redundant". I do not think that the way we have been doing diplomacy for 400 or 500 years is redundant. Many of the lessons that we can learn from the great diplomats in history about tact, resilience, courage and creativity are very much relevant to today's Middle East and diplomacy. It is the tools that have changed, rather than the basic practice and craft of diplomacy.

But, as you say, technology completely shifts the nature of the terrain. What I found as ambassador in Beirut, but now living as I do in Abu Dhabi and spending a lot of my time in rooms with people much younger than me as a visiting professor at New York University, is that this is a very connected, networked generation. If we are to influence them as we need to, we also need to be part of that terrain. We need to understand it and speak the language in the way we learned to speak Arabic. Digital is a real battlefield. It is about not just taking on the really bad guys, the radicalisers of Islamic State and extremists, but appealing to that middle ground: the people who are at risk of radicalisation who may be curious about our approach and values, but do not always hear from us what we stand for. That is the group we need to reach in different ways. You have to use new technology to do that. As an ambassador, I found the smartphone was a superpower. It was a means of connecting with people in a way that our predecessors could never have done.

Q177 **The Chairman:** Thank you for that. I apologise: I was beginning by talking about the policy sweep when I used the adjectives "obsolete" and "redundant". I fully accept your point that the arts and skills of diplomacy, even if empowered digitally, remain constant. There is no

substitute for shared diplomatic skill. In a moment one of my colleagues will question you on that, particularly on your interesting book *Naked Diplomacy: Power and Statecraft in the Digital Age*, in which you have some very strong things to say on that.

Holding you on policy for a moment, the UK has spent 100 years worrying about Middle East oil, Middle East stability, the Palestine mandate, the need to contain somehow the potential Shi'ite-Sunni civil war—it is no longer contained; it is now exploding—and a whole variety of other issues, such as containing the old settlement with France, the Sykes-Picot line and so on. All that seems to have been swept away as we look at this new Middle East. Is that right, or are we getting too dramatic?

Tom Fletcher: The Middle East is not immune from the broader trends we are all experiencing; 2016 was a reminder of what those trends are—political uncertainty and distrust of traditional institutions and authority, and economic uncertainty and inequality, which the Middle East has in particular. There is a great concern about where the jobs will come from for the next generation coming through without economic growth. There is also a more existential uncertainty about what new technology will do to us as humans, as society and as a community. They face those three great synchronised shifts in the same way we do, and they are also feeling very buffeted by those.

When we in Britain look at the Middle East, too often we generalise and think of it as one big problem, which is like looking at Europe and regarding it as one big problem—some of the Committee might feel that way—but of course it is a diverse patchwork of countries, sects and society. We often focus on the ink-spots of trouble rather than the vast areas of great potential or indeed just great continuity and stability.

I live in Abu Dhabi at the moment. There is enormous dynamism and creative vigour in a place such as this which is often neglected in our coverage of the Middle East. When I was in Beirut, everyone assumed that I had been sent there as some sort of punishment, as we used to joke. The reality was that my day-to-day life was engaging with people doing extraordinary bits of business and creativity, connecting in new and exciting ways. There is a very vibrant education sector. There are all sorts of things going on there that we do not normally pick up on in our more confined narratives around extremism and radicalisation.

You mentioned the Sunni-Shia cleavage in the region. Of all the trends in foreign policy that we have perhaps been slow to understand and act on over my working life, over two decades at the Foreign Office, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the most important one in the Middle East. We often deal with these countries in isolation and fail to deal with the broader regional implications of that very difficult, challenging relationship.

The Chairman: Let us pursue the diplomacy angle. Lord Inglewood would like to ask you a question.

Q178 Lord Inglewood: You have been describing the problems associated with diplomacy in the Middle East. I suspect that a lot of them are being experienced here in this country, where the impact of digital is obviously very far-reaching. As far as diplomacy is concerned, if I understand you correctly, you see the use of digital technology as a new tool applied to an old discipline. How well do you think the United Kingdom is doing in this? Do you think the thing is moving so fast that the lessons of this year may not be the lessons for next year?

Tom Fletcher: That is a fair question. I was just in Copenhagen launching with the Foreign Minister there the world's first digital ambassador. Things are moving quickly. Of course, that is no reason not to try to keep up. We have to accept that diplomats and civil servants will never be the world's greatest innovators, but they can use the innovations of others to do their jobs more effectively.

Diplomacy has always been Darwinian. In the corner of the room here at the embassy there is a fax machine. I recall that someone said you could replace the Foreign Office with a fax. The Foreign Office is still there. The fax machine is just about still there but probably not for much longer. There will be some who argue that you could replace the Foreign Office with a social media account, or a WhatsApp message between Foreign Ministers. I do not agree. We adjusted diplomacy when steamships came along, when electricity came along, when the television was invented, and it will need to adjust again to deal with these new tools.

What the new tools give us that the previous ones did not are the means not only to understand and analyse the world and collect information on it, but for the first time the means to influence at a much broader level the public and not just the elites. The elites have always been our focus. Suddenly we find that we can now start to drive policy change—positive change, I hope—in a region such as the Middle East through these new tools. That is the really exciting aspect.

When I wanted to change the popular approach to the treatment of migrant workers in Lebanon I could have given a speech that would have been noticed by three people or written an article which might have been read by eight. Instead, we had a social media campaign where I became a domestic worker for the morning and those pictures went viral. But then the Ethiopian worker who I was job-swapping with became the ambassador for the afternoon and her speech went viral and challenged people in a way that classic diplomacy would not have done. That is just one small example of the ways I think we can adjust.

On the UK angle, we were one of the first movers on social media. We are in the top five or six countries in the use of social media. When I started as an ambassador six or seven years ago, there were maybe four ambassadors using social media. Now virtually every ambassador does. But we cannot move in as fleet-footed a way as some of the small countries. Estonia, Croatia, Kosovo—some of these countries are very effective. There is an arms race, if you like, and we are competing with many other hungry, agile rivals.

Lord Inglewood: Is there any particular reason why the Estonians and others that you named are quicker and fleeter of foot than we are?

Tom Fletcher: It is partly culture. One of the things we identified in the review I did [*Audio lost*]. In a larger organisation, with traditions and structures, these are the risks that you need to take to be successful with social media. I was very fortunate in Beirut that, because I had worked in Downing Street, people assumed that I had a bit more cover than I really did to take some of those risks. Some of those smaller countries do more of that. Because they are smaller, their leaders are more used to being on social media as a means of interacting with their own public. Kosovo was recognised online before it was recognised offline.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I am so ancient that I was working in the Foreign Office as an under-secretary when fax machines first arrived. They did actually transform the relationship with the European Union, because you could transmit great pages of figures and so on and get them accurate, because so long as they were being transmitted by telegram you were at the mercy of somebody putting their finger on the wrong figure and then the whole thing was completely useless. I had a little problem with the Foreign Office, because the communications people said that the fax machine would be down with them and I said, "Oh no, it will be up next to my office, thank you very much", and it was. It was a transformation.

Sorry, that was really a rather long digression. I wanted to ask you about what you said about Sunni and Shia, which has been the focus of much of the evidence that we have taken. What is your take on the balance in this Sunni-Shia rivalry between religion and politics? Is it mainly a power relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran with a religious dressing, or is it a fundamental religious divide that happens to coincide with the state religions of Saudi Arabia and Iran? In answering this, could you perhaps also suggest whether it is in Britain's interest to find some way of mediating? That is perhaps the wrong word but it is not in our interest to see that continuing into a kind of Thirty Years' War between the two. If that is so, what can we usefully do to ensure that does not happen or continue?

Tom Fletcher: That is a tough question. Forgive me if I give a slightly Foreign Office-y answer and say it is both. [*Audio lost*] In the last 10 years it has taken on a more Iran-Saudi Arabia dimension. We should not fall into the trap that parts of the region all into of assuming that it is some kind of zero-sum game and that we need to choose a side. That is clearly not an option. Sitting in Beirut, where the balance between Sunni and Shia was more even, I sometimes observed that many of our policies suggested to the region that we had picked a side. That was because, as a result of our very difficult long-term relationship with Iran, we did not have many more moderate Shia voices to listen to. So when a crisis hit, often the first telephone calls would be to Doha, Riyadh or Tel Aviv. We would get only one side of that debate. My great hope is that now that the Iran deal is in place, we can broaden the conversation with Iran in a

more intelligent, strategic and long-term way. Excuse me, the mosque is going off in the background. Apologies if the audio is bad again.

The Chairman: We are getting you very clearly at the moment.

Lord Grocott: As an aside, I plead guilty to being one of those who wondered when you moved from Downing Street to Beirut whether that would be the kind of career move that I would have been keen on copying. This is a question about the extent to which a diplomat can use the new communication methods at our disposal. In your book you say, "Diplomats need to become 'digital interventionists' in order to influence the countries in which they work". What are the boundaries to this activity? Essentially, it is a direct communication between the "foreign power" and the public in a country without the standard intermediary of the state authorities. Where are the boundaries drawn between promoting Britain's activities and influencing the way in which the political system operates in a country?

Tom Fletcher: That is a really difficult question. We are building that plane as we fly it. We are testing where those lines are. Downing Street was perfect preparation for dealing with the assassination threats and internecine warfare of Beirut. Actually, it was much harder going from the rodeo of the Gordon Brown No. 10 to the dressage of the David Cameron No. 10 than it was going from London to Beirut.

This is a source of real debate in the Foreign Office. For example, should diplomats and public servants have a public profile at all? The reality is that you build that up in-country. We always would have done. Lord Hannay would have had a public profile in the countries he was serving in. But now that echoes much more back into the domestic market than it would have done before. For me it was a great source of self-censorship to know that I was followed by most of the political correspondents, including the *Daily Mail* because it meant *[Audio lost]*.

Who do diplomats represent? A passage that was removed from my book was a reflection on this. I was reflecting on the fact that we have moved from *[Audio lost]* to being Her Majesty's Government's ambassadors as well. Obviously, that is a transition that has happened over many decades. Now we are ambassadors at large as well. I am most effective as ambassador when I somehow own that whole British brand—from David Beckham to Prince Harry, from Burberry to Jaguar to Scottish whisky—rather than speaking purely as a representative of the British Government. That is a controversial view. That was the bit that was removed from the book, because people felt that that was challenging an orthodoxy that was not yet ready to be challenged. I certainly felt that I was there to connect with a public at large. As I said to Lord Howell, if we do not connect with that public we leave a dangerous vacuum, in the Middle East and elsewhere, because it will be filled by the wall-builders rather than people such as us who want to promote coexistence.

The Chairman: That is a controversial view, but is it not the new reality? What you are saying and what you have perceived is that there is a vast

amount of information around, a vast amount of connectivity, with literally trillions and quadrillions of connections going on every day between groups and interests outside government. This places those who are seeking to govern and have legitimate authority in a much more challenging situation, where they have to link up with many wider audiences the whole time. Here is my slightly naughty question: is this analysis being applied sufficiently back here in London? I think one of your tasks when you were passing through London was to look again at how our great and good Foreign & Commonwealth Office fitted in with this new world. Are we moving in the right direction?

Tom Fletcher: We have to be careful in this world of zillions of communications passing back and forth. For example, the 10,000 tweets I sent in Beirut, put together, would tell a story about Britain's values, prosperity and security. There would be a sense of purpose to them. One thing we must not do as public servants and diplomats is see this as a popularity contest where we are all simply competing to have more followers than the Foreign Secretary. It is not just about the number of hits you get, the number of hashtags and retweets and so on. There has to be a purpose to it. That is much easier at post, where you have a public profile already.

We have a certain amount of autonomy to promote UK messages. My sense is that it is much harder to do that from a desk in London and that Ministers would probably look askance at too many officials in London having high-profile Twitter accounts, for example, and issuing a running commentary on the issues of the day. Those lines are quite blurred. It is shifting and it will shift more as more high-profile social media ambassadors come back to London and bring their followers with them but for the time being it is much easier to do this effectively a long way from home.

The Chairman: Lord Reid, you wanted to pursue this issue.

Q179 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Thank you, Tom. You made the interesting point that social media—indeed, the whole of cyber—empowers not only individuals but small states. So we have this distinction between the long history of diplomacy and the skillset that underpins it and the sense of the United Kingdom being a developed nation in that sense, but the tools being modern. In the digital world there are no developed nations: we are all developing nations. Given the changed circumstances, at least in the conveyance of diplomacy through new tools, what is your view of the UK's standing in the region? How can this best be optimised? Specifically, how important will access to the UK's education system and labour markets be to our standing and our engagement with countries in the Middle East?

Tom Fletcher: You are absolutely correct, Lord Reid, that it tends to empower some of the start-up nations, which can move faster. Lord Howell, you mentioned the review that I did at the Foreign Office where we tried to make the Foreign Office more fleet-footed and more agile. That is happening now. I know that. I can see already that even in the

past six months our diplomats are better equipped and better trained to cope out there in that environment than they were before. *[Audio lost]* The quieter majority find it harder to create the kind of content that really engages people and gets them interested in what we have to say. *[Audio lost]*

At the heart of what Britain does really well—at the heart of our national brand—is the quality of our education, particularly higher education. I used to go to universities in the Middle East and I would be harangued about the Balfour Declaration or Sykes-Picot and British policy by people who were doing degrees in order to get into the UK education system and who, incidentally, were often wearing Premiership football kits. That shows *[Audio lost]*. We have to be so careful that we chase after students to bring them into our system rather than chase them away. We have to show that Britain has not become isolationist after 2016. We have to show that we have a view of the world. I would love us to do more to attract the world's top students to our universities and to reduce the barriers to them attending.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I have one follow-up question. You stress, quite rightly, the potency of the use of social media, but it also has great dangers as well, does it not, such as the expectation that people will respond almost immediately to profound questions in 140 characters in 30 seconds—witness the use of Twitter by some prominent politicians, say, in the United States. It leads to a great temptation for instant communications solutions and competition to get in first with the tritest responses. Do you recognise that as a danger?

Tom Fletcher: Absolutely. It is a huge danger. Responses are very fast. Often by the time we have come up with our well-thought-through, measured response, the world has moved on to the next story. Donald Trump has tweeted something else and the whole cavalcade has moved on. When I talked to ambassadors who were coming on to Twitter in particular, I always stressed that quality still matters. We cannot reduce the quality of our communication. We cannot suddenly start tweeting too many acronyms and so on. There has to be a standard to it. More importantly than that, the tweet has to be the tip of the iceberg. There has to be a strong policy basis underneath it that gives it some solidity. There is a danger sometimes that there is no iceberg.

This is a pre-Twitter problem, by the way. When I was in Downing Street, under different-colour Administrations, we would often focus too much on the message that would be on the Sky ticker than the actual policy response to underpin it, because it was such a fast-moving 24/7 media environment. That has sped up even more. We are no longer talking about 140 words on a Sky screen, we are talking about 140 characters in a tweet. Somehow, we have to ensure that the tweets are high quality, fast and agile, but part of something more solid.

Q180 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** I concur with your reflection relating to students. When I was in an UNRWA camp outside Beirut last year I met a round table of young Palestinians, all of whom put the source of their plight

down to Balfour and the Brits. But when I asked if they could not go home to Palestine, where they would want to be, the majority wanted to come to the UK. Clearly, the UK brand of what we represent is very strong. I also went to Baalbek, where your impact is worth recognising because you were very well known and respected for the work you did in Baalbek-Hermel, and I want to stress that.

I want to ask you about the broad strategic interests for the UK and what we are doing in Lebanon with supporting the army and the police force, the remarkable work of the British Council there, and the recent support we have been giving to the Lebanese education system. Do you see this as a potential model for our relationship with countries in the Middle East, or is it too simple to say that this approach of supporting security, education and creativity can be transposed into other countries, given that, as you said at the outset, you cannot simply look at the region as a whole in one bloc?

Tom Fletcher: Thank you very much for mentioning those initiatives. Obviously, I am a slightly biased commentator on whether or not they should be the model for my colleagues. I do not think I would make myself very popular by suggesting that they could be. I am glad you mentioned the substance there. Some of us talk a lot about social media and the potential of it. It is assumed that we do not care about the substance. In reality, all the social media that we did that was reaching people in Baalbek and Hermel and so on was to promote the fact that we were doing these extraordinary things on the ground to make their lives more secure. The most significant moment *[Audio lost]* built from materials sourced in Northern Ireland—

Lord Purvis of Tweed: Sorry, Mr Fletcher, the sound dropped out as soon you said “the most significant moment”. Perhaps you could repeat that for us.

Tom Fletcher: The most important thing in Beirut was in July 2013 when Islamic State hit the Lebanese border, as it had hit other borders and knocked through them in the past. It came across from the Syrian side. It was targeting a Christian town four or five miles inside the border. Unknown to Islamic State, we had worked with the Lebanese Army to put a watchtower on that spot with materials sourced from Belfast, with UK-trained Lebanese soldiers, and they pushed Islamic State back. That was the only border it has hit so far that it could not get across. The work we do with the army is extraordinarily important.

In the past five or six years, the amount we spend in Lebanon has increased about a hundredfold, mainly in response to what was going on in Syria. Obviously, education is vital across the Middle East, and this is something I am very involved with still. The other thing we refocused on was the next generation and we started something called the UK Lebanon Tech Hub, which has just received extra funding from the UK Government, I am pleased to say.

To address your point about whether there is a model here, the argument is that we need to focus on doing a few things really well and not try to do everything. In the case of Lebanon, those things were: army, education and that investment in entrepreneurship and the creativity of the next generation. But they will be different things in different places. We have not really touched on FCO resources yet, but we have to accept that the Foreign Office is no longer resourced to do everything as well as it once did.

The Chairman: I am sorry, I cut out Lord Hannay earlier, who wanted to follow up on an earlier question.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I wanted to follow up to be sure of what I thought was a very important point you made that the digital instruments that you are advocating—in my view, quite rightly—that ambassadors should use much more work better in the field, in the country that you are accredited to, and not so well from the centre, where they get confused, as President Trump is demonstrating now, with the formulation of policy and all the things that Lord Reid said about instant reaction through tweeting. You put your finger on an important thing. Perhaps you would comment on that.

It is even better when you are several time zones apart from your home base, because that makes a big difference. When I was at the UN, the US ambassador had much more trouble, because he was in the same time zone as Jim Baker and Jim Baker did not much like it if he was knocked off the evening news by the UN ambassador. I was five hours behind and Ministers in London had all gone to bed by the time I appeared on television. That time zone thing matters, but it also strikes me that you have made a very important distinction about this instrument being really necessary and useful for ambassadors on the ground but not necessarily being transposable to the centre where the policy-making function is taking place. Does that make sense? Have I understood rightly?

Tom Fletcher: Absolutely. Many of my colleagues who have come back from posts into London have found this a tricky transition to make and are still working out where those should be. This morning I hosted Baroness Ashton here. We taught a class together about how you would use social media in a negotiation on Cyprus. You would have lots to help us with on that.

The time zone point is important. I was lucky in Lebanon that, to be honest, there was not a huge amount of day-to-day interest in what was going on in Lebanon. It would be much harder to tweet in a creative, slightly risky way if you were posted in, say, Riyadh, Brussels or Washington. It must be very tough for any European ambassador in Washington to be on Twitter now. *[Audio lost]*

The Chairman: I am afraid you got badly cut out there again. We will press on. Lord Wood, would you like to follow up on the question of outside influence?

Q181 Lord Wood of Anfield: The crisis in Syria is a crisis for lots of reasons, but it has really been a crisis of multilateral institutions trying to effect a positive outcome in the Middle East, so we have the spectre of peace talks now with no EU, no UN—no US either. Are we now in a world where external attempts to shape the Middle East are an ad hoc matter—individual countries combining in the way that Russia and Turkey are at the moment, for example—or do you think that Britain should be thinking about re-engaging post-Brexit by re-strengthening its commitment to international multilateral institutions? What scope is there for multilateral institutions to effect a positive outcome, and should Britain see its role of engagement primarily through those or still in great power mode from the past—to ask you a leading question?

Tom Fletcher: Thank you. A general point is that diplomacy itself is being disrupted by this technological change. So suddenly it is no longer necessarily the go-to bit of machinery to deal with the world's challenges. It is much harder to do diplomacy in times of austerity and introspection, and when the enemies are not clearly defined—they are not the bad guy in the Bond film any more. It was all made much harder, as you say, in Syria, basically because the UN Security Council sub-contracted our collective conscience and policy to Russia. Clearly, the scaffolding that we built around international relations is very fragile at the moment.

I agree with the sense of your question: the only answer is to invest more in the international architecture. The fact that we are exiting one piece of architecture should mean that we go in even harder on UN reform. I am currently writing a report for the Secretary-General on how to use digital technology to help the UN deliver its mandate more effectively. I hope that the UK collectively invests heavily in the UN system and the international rules-based system more widely, and does not create the risk that we are perceived as closing off from all that, especially at a time when the American Administration may well be.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Is there not a risk that we have a Premier League-versus-Championship division, that multilateral institutions are invested in by the smaller and medium-sized countries but the Russias and the United States and maybe the Chinas intervene off their own bat, so multilateral institutions become the collective property of the second tier?

Tom Fletcher: It is a risk that has been there for some time, to be honest. If you look around the Security Council now at the leaders of China, Russia and America, you do not necessarily have a coalition there for international, rules-based, tolerant understanding and diplomacy. Inevitably the other tiers will have more of a voice in these institutions, and they will use these institutions to restrain more those bigger powers, but we should be very much part of that. In the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Talleyrand got the deal he did because he let the smaller powers into the room in order to put pressure on the other big powers. He then, of course, kicked them out immediately afterwards, but I think the first part of the model still stands.

Q182 **The Chairman:** I am going to ask you one final macro question arising from what you were talking about in response to Lord Wood. In the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a gigantic shift in the global share of GDP from the west and the north to the east and the south—rising Asia, rising Africa, rising Latin America—particularly China and the other Asian powers. You also mentioned Russia. To what extent are these changes changing attitudes in the place you are now sitting, the United Arab Emirates, in the centre of a very prosperous part of the world, which has grown very rich on hydrocarbons? Is the West fading from the scene a bit? Are the Chinese businesses and the great market forces of Asia beginning to have a much more influential role in the daily lives of the people around you?

Tom Fletcher: I feel that much more acutely here in Abu Dhabi than I did in Beirut. Beirut felt much closer to Europe, not just geographically. It looked more to the West. If you talk to the think-tankers here and the longer-term strategists, they are looking eastwards to a much greater degree. But it is not a zero-sum game. The key thing for the UAE is that it is part of an open global trading economy. This is where we can place our standard. People here see the world dividing much more clearly into closed and open trading nations. They are conscious that a shrinkage in global trade of 5% has a huge impact on an economy such as Dubai's or Abu Dhabi's, just as it does on an economy such as London's. In a way, it comes back to Lord Wood's point. There are areas here where you can build new coalitions around issues such as free trade *[Audio lost]*. It will be a very strong, flexible coalition. *[Audio lost]* It will be issue by issue.

The Chairman: I think our time is up. You have really helped us open our minds more to the enormous impact of the information, communications and technology revolution and what it is doing to international relations generally, to the societies that you have studied and worked in, and to the kind of policy stance that Britain must adopt in the future to be relevant, protect our interests, promote our interests and generally act responsibly as a world power. I thank you for all that. We could have done with another hour. We could have done with more of what we actually got because of technological interruption, but thank you very much indeed. We are most grateful and we shall all read your book—again. Thank you so much.

Tom Fletcher: Thank you very much, your Lordships.