



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Thursday 2 March 2017

11:30am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Lord Inglewood; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

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Questions 190 - 195

Witness

I: Tobias Ellwood MP, Minister for Middle East and Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Mr Neil Bush, Head of Arabian Peninsula and Iran Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Mr Michael Howells, Head of Near East Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Mr Tobias Ellwood MP; Mr Neil Bush, Head of Arabian Peninsula and Iran Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Mr Michael Howells, Head of Near East Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Q190 **The Chairman:** Minister, good morning and welcome. Thank you for coming in and sharing your time with us today. We are extremely grateful. I have an obligation to remind you formally that this is a public session. There will be a transcript and, if you want to make changes to it afterwards, that is perfectly acceptable. Those are the formalities.

I think that you are probably aware that this Committee is seeking, ambitiously, to reassess all the patterns of power in the whole of the turbulent region of the Middle East, for which you are the Minister responsible, and to draw out the implications, which we think are probably considerable, for the policy of Her Majesty's Government.

I will start on strategic policy. We get the impression from all our witnesses in our hearings, from the media and from the papers submitted to us that policy is on the move at a strategic level and at specific levels as well. The question is: are we just seeing ripples, or is something really happening of a major kind? Have decisions been made? I shall describe what I mean by policies shifting. The two-state solution regarding Palestine and Israel, on which President Trump has dropped some remarks—are we moving on that long-established policy? The UN refugee convention—are we changing our attitude on that? Have we shifted on Libya, with its vast complexities? Suddenly we seem to be friendlier to General Haftar. When the Foreign Secretary was before this Committee a few weeks ago, he seemed to suggest that the attitude to Bashar al-Assad was perhaps not going to be quite so stringent as it had been in the past. Behind this, is there a rowing back on the whole Arab Spring structure of Foreign Office policy five or six years ago, which was to support the liberty and democracy movements, the people's parties, that were going to overthrow the tyrant? Are we now hearing from Washington, and are we going to follow, the opposite route—that it is the strong men and tough guys in the Middle East whom we should be backing rather than sacking? Give us your take on that impression. Tell us whether we are wrong or right that these big shifts are taking place.

Tobias Ellwood MP: First, Lord Chairman, thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to sit before you and explain in detail some of the foreign policy areas of concern. I do not think the situation is as binary as you lay out in suggesting that the approach is "Back the strong man" or indeed "Go for regime change". You have covered a series of questions and thrown a vast geographical net quite wide. I have written down "Trump, UN refugees, Libya/Haftar and Assad". Would you like me to touch on each of those? Maybe that will prompt questions.

The Chairman: Yes. That was deliberately general because we are seeking to get an impression of how much change there has been.

Tobias Ellwood MP: Policy has to reflect the changing world around us. Over the period that you have just reflected on, the last five years, you could argue that there have been many rising tensions within countries and indeed between them, as well as the growth of non-state actors. Clearly we have seen a new transition in the United States—an Administration coming in and, dare I say it, advancing their own position, with for the first time ever a President who is non-military and a non-politician taking the helm. By their own admission, the dust has not settled in many positions. Certainly from my perspective as an elected person—I am conscious of the room I am in—things get said in the heat of election campaigns that perhaps need to be nuanced once you are in government. We are certainly seeing that in examples where we have been able to seek clarity from the American Administration—for example, on their commitment to NATO. The concerns expressed by General Mattis on countries meeting their 2% obligation remain, but the Americans are absolutely committed to continuing to support NATO. I am pleased that our Prime Minister was able to advance and encourage the US Administration's position in that field. So it is too early to say with regard to the US Administration, as we are developing our relationships with them and working out how we can meet some of the challenges that you have mentioned already.

On the UN refugee convention, many of the conventions that we face—like many of the Bretton Woods organisations, if I can call them that, which were created after the Second World War—were designed for a particular circumstance and time period. As I said, we now face a completely different environment. There is not only the real threat that we see from the Middle East but the indirect consequences of that. How does Europe manage the movement of refugees who then come into Europe? These old organisations, including the United Nations itself, perhaps need to reconsider what they do. A specific example is Aleppo. People look to the UN and the Security Council to be a senior forum for international arbitration where answers to the challenges are formed, but with Aleppo we were not able to secure a resolution because it was vetoed again and again by Russia. As Matthew Rycroft, our UN head of mission, said, this shows that the Security Council is not working as it was designed to. You could say the same for the European Union, in that people across Europe expected it to deal with and have answers to, first, the Ukrainian situation and the impact of Russia, and then the scale of the migration problem. It was not able to provide those answers in the way that people expected. The rise of populism, this anger, perhaps fuelled the Brexit result and, arguably, the election of Donald Trump as well. So we are seeing internationally-based organisations losing their authority in the eyes of many people because they cannot provide the solutions that we need today.

To advance a positive here, there is a space for Britain to show greater leadership, provide those answers and utilise our soft power to be able to seek solutions. We cannot have a situation where, while it led to a brief ceasefire in Syria, talks on Syria are taken out of the auspices of the UN. They moved to Astana but we are pleased that they have come back to

Geneva, as that should be the forum where these things happen. Britain can do more to make sure that we show leadership on the international stage.

The Chairman: That partly answers my general questions. You said that there is space. The question is how we formulate our approach into that space, which raises entirely new challenges.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I am listening to what you have to say about the United Nations and Matthew Rycroft, who in my experience does a wonderful job. Is it not a bit odd to say that the UN is unable to do the job that it was meant to do, when of course that was precisely the situation of the UN between 1947 and 1990? We did not say that the UN was therefore no good; we said that it must be enabled to do the job that the charter laid down for it. Is that still our position? I would argue that it ought to be. If we start saying that all these organisations—the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization—were designed for a different epoch, we are basically setting off into uncharted waters and saying that anyone can take a pot-shot at them. I thought that the security strategy that the Government adopted last year said that we were going to stand up for a rules-based international community. Well, the rules are the rules laid down in those organisations. If, for example, the US Administration decide to pay no attention to what the World Trade Organization does, we will be in dire trouble, will we not?

Tobias Ellwood MP: I agree with you, but we also have to recognise that, as I said, many of these organisations were created and designed to deal with the challenges of the day, and those challenges have changed. Therefore the work that these organisations do and what they are expected to achieve also needs to be advanced. We cannot have another Srebrenica or Rwanda taking place—that is where we went in Aleppo, going from siege to slaughter—with the one organisation that the world looks at to be able to provide a solution, the UN Security Council, being unable to get the resolution that we needed. There are two possibilities here: either we go down the avenue of saying that we bypass the UNSC and get a coalition of the willing to deal with whatever individual challenges there might be, or we say, “Actually, perhaps we need to address why it is that the Security Council was unable to seek a resolution for month after month”. A whole series of positive resolutions—they were fairly neutral, as well, not one-sided or against Assad; many of them were focused purely on humanitarian aid—were unable to get through the Security Council to give us the legal mandate to provide the support that the people in Britain and indeed the international community expect.

Lord Grocott: Minister, on the two-state solution, with which you will no doubt be familiar, this is quite near the end of our evidence-taking sessions and it is fair to say that virtually everyone who has spoken to us about this issue has said either that we are perilously close to the point at which that solution is no longer feasible or that we have actually arrived at that point. I know that you have had things to say about this. I do not

know whether you were correctly reported, but after the last burst of Israeli settlement activity you said that they were contrary to international law and an obstacle to a two-state solution. We have had evidence from a very practised person about the region that denunciations from the international community, from whatever level or source, are ignored by Israel because it has found from experience that, although there may be quite the bark, there is absolutely no subsequent penalty for ignoring the views of the international community. In view of the Government's stated position on this, do you think that there is any sign whatever of Israel taking any notice? What further action should be taken if the will of the international community continues to be ignored?

Tobias Ellwood MP: First, as we illustrated in our support for Resolution 2334, we very much support the concept of the two-state solution. Going back to the resolutions that we supported in the past—Resolutions 181 and, in 1967, 242—and even back to when our mandate ended and the whole concept of two states was originally put forward, we have been consistent in our position. We are pleased when we look at the read-outs from the American Administration. Indeed, yesterday I met the Israeli ambassador, who confirmed that it remains Prime Minister Netanyahu's ambition to continue to support a two-state solution as well. Over the Christmas period we specifically supported the resolution that the growth of settlements is coming perilously close to making that an impossibility, simply because the geography means that access to areas A, B and C is difficult and they cut up the West Bank such that you could not actually govern it in the sense of a state.

You say that the Israelis simply ignore and continue to build. The fact is that the international community, including the Americans and ourselves, must continue to make the case that these are illegal settlements and, according to international law, not there for perpetuity. I put this to Israeli Defence Minister Lieberman when he came here. He actually lives in one of the settlements in the West Bank. I said to him, "If there is a two-state solution and you find yourself in an area that can't be part of a land swap, will you be happy—or, if not happy, content—to then leave your building and move to a place that is part of the final status agreement?" He said, "Absolutely". That gave me the reassurance that, no matter how many buildings they build, we must keep making the case that the settlements are wrong. They should not overshadow the fact that they are simply buildings and, ultimately, buildings can be removed or form part of a land swap. We should remain absolutely focused on saying that the two-state solution is what we want to achieve.

As a balancing argument, though, I should make it clear that there are massive security issues that the country faces that also prohibit an advancement towards an environment that can bring the two parties together, not least the differences between those in Gaza and those in the West Bank. We need to work hard to ensure that Fatah is able to influence or work with Hamas so that they can then come to the table and present a viable capability that can allow two states to come into form.

Lord Grocott: Do I take it that you are convinced by the evidence that you received from someone living in one of the settlements that the Israeli Government are sincere in wanting to work towards a two-state solution?

Tobias Ellwood MP: We have made it clear that we have to convince Israel and the Israeli people that if they continue down the track of drifting towards a one-state solution then it will not be a Jewish state, and eventually it will get to the point when the Palestinians outnumber the Israelis. Where is the Jewish homeland in that scenario? That is what we need to press on the Israeli people; we must convince them that it is in everyone's long-term interests. I will give an example, though I do not want to digress too much. You will be fully aware of the history of the region and the tensions that existed with Egypt and Jordan. After the 1967 war, very brave leaders accepted the right of Israel to exist, and in the cases of both Jordan and Egypt they paid for it with their lives. Ultimately, though, the economic agenda that they are now pursuing is in everyone's interest. They are sharing intelligence as well and working together. That shows that it can be done and we can get there. We can reach a two-state solution that will be to everyone's benefit.

Lord Inglewood: To go back to your initial comments, you said, and I do not think that anyone would really disagree, that there is considerable disillusion with international organisations, not least because of their inability to deliver in the face of problems such as Ukraine and Aleppo. You then said that this creates a vacuum and gives us an opportunity to develop and advance our policies and actions. I want to ask you a basic question. What can we actually do? Soft power is not going to help Ukraine. How can we, the UK, take these things forward in a way that actually does something? It is easy to talk and to have policies, but it is about actually delivering on the ground.

Tobias Ellwood MP: As the Minister for the Middle East and Africa, I hope that you will understand that I am probably not the best person to give illustrations on Ukraine.

Lord Inglewood: I do not mind about the location. Let us go back to Aleppo, which you mentioned.

Tobias Ellwood MP: Okay. When you have areas such as Aleppo, Yemen or anywhere in the Middle East, we take an interest in the world around us. That is what Britain does. We have Arabists across the Middle East and we invest time, through our history, our networks and so on, in trying to understand what is going on. What we bring to the table in addition to others is a desire and a commitment to try to effect change and be a force for good for the future. Where things differ from the past is that these things often need to be done through those very international organisations to give us legal remit, whether that be for, hypothetically, creating safe zones in Syria or indeed advancing a solution that will be in the long-term interests of all the stakeholders in Syria. Let us face facts, though: in August 2013 we blinked. We need to make ourselves tougher and learn from that. We had a vote in this House that

considered whether we would take punitive action against Assad and the UK failed to act where it wanted to. We failed to sell it to Parliament and then Parliament failed to endorse the Executive to take action. From that moment forward, Russia took full advantage of the fact that we and, immediately afterwards, the United States stepped back from showing full interest in this area. That is where we need to learn. There are occasions where we need to be cognitive in our thoughts but robust in our actions as well.

Lord Inglewood: To go back to that matter, we here were all involved in it. We heard the Foreign Secretary elaborate that argument some weeks ago. I am not sure that I personally buy it, but I do not want to go into that. Do we have the resources to be able to deliver improvements and change that go beyond what we do by simply having, for want of a better and fairer way of putting it, pious sentiments about what we would like to see?

Tobias Ellwood MP: Let us place into context what I just said. It does not mean that Britain goes into every area and solves the issues; it means that we show the leadership for those issues and challenges to be solved. A great example is Somalia. I do not know whether you are covering it as part of your remit, but it is a country that has just come out of a very dark chapter and could easily slip back into another difficult period if we are not able to get a grip on what al-Shabaab is doing, particularly in the south of the country. Somalia has just had presidential elections. It is a very unstable country but it is ambitiously embracing a new federated structure. The AMISOM nations are participating there, and they need leadership. The S6 countries are donating funds to help it work, but that needs leadership as well. What Britain is doing through the Prime Minister's conference, which will take place in a couple of months' time, is bringing together the parties to consider and offer solutions.

Another example is tackling Ebola, where a coalition of the willing came forward, Britain among them, in order to help—specifically, for us, in Sierra Leone. That is the sort of leadership that we are performing. We are just now sending 400 troops to South Sudan as well as providing support for the people who can have the biggest influence in that country, the Catholic Church, which is doing an amazing job at understanding some of the challenges that are taking place in that country. So we do not go in there and solve absolutely everything ourselves, but we are showing the leadership with the parties involved, the stakeholders who are connected to it. Because of our respect, our depth of interest, our history and so on, we can play a great leadership role in meeting some of the challenges that we face.

Lord Inglewood: And that is the focus of the policy?

The Chairman: Minister, your answers are interesting because they show the strength of your feeling, and no doubt that of your colleagues, that back in 2013 we should have gone in heavily against Bashar al-Assad and we missed an opportunity, and that Britain should be substantially involved. If so, and this is a Committee that is trying to get

at the policy and justification behind it all, out of the responsibility to protect as a world policeman, worries about oil and gas—or has that all passed?—and worries about jihadi influence and terrorism, which would you put at the top of the pile of reasons why we should be heavily involved in a way that would be expensive in manpower, lives and resources?

Tobias Ellwood MP: Again, I am not sure that there is even enough time in the hour that we have to articulate a response to that. First, you point in particular to the Middle East. Its security is our security. We rely on many of the Middle Eastern countries—Qatar, for example—to keep the lights burning here because we are a net importer of gas. Also, our strategic influence in the area and the bonds that we have with these nations, going back to the Trucial States agreements, are important to us. Trade with these countries, the prosperity agenda, is also important. So when our joint economies and bilateral relationships are challenged by some of the issues that you mention, particularly the jihadi threat, we absolutely have to take an interest. That does not mean being the world's policeman, but it does mean coming up with the ideas that the world might then accept, adapt and participate in with British leadership.

A great example of that is the leadership that we are showing in the counter-Daesh coalition. I will spend a minute on this because it is quite important. There are five streams that we are focusing on to defeat Daesh. First, there is the military component, and you are fully aware of how we are involved in that. Secondly, there is the humanitarian and stabilisation work that we are doing, with £2.3 billion of aid going into the country along with UN organisations and others. Thirdly, there is stemming the flow of foreign fighters, including from Britain, and helping other countries such as Tunisia and Morocco to identify them. They are getting far better at recognising and identifying who might be vulnerable and attracted to go to fight with these extremist organisations. Fourthly, there is the stemming of funds as well, looking at international banking networks to stop the movement of money coming from rich individuals who see this as a worthy cause to support.

Lastly, and most critically, is strategic communications, which involves us working with Facebook, Twitter and other major platforms to cut down on the ability of these organisations, wherever they are in the world, to reach every bedroom in Britain and indeed elsewhere and sell their false and poisonous ideology. I am afraid that too many vulnerable people are reading this stuff and seeing it as a fast-track to paradise, believing that somehow all the misdemeanours they have committed on this earth will be forgiven if they strap on an explosive device for this cause. We lead that fifth element, strategic communications; I am one of the co-chairs of this, along with the Emirates and indeed the US. That is important because every extremist organisation, from here on into the future, will use the internet for its recruitment base. Governments, religious organisations and communities and indeed the private sector, the internet companies themselves, have been very slow in recognising why

it is important for us to have better understanding of how the internet is being used.

The Chairman: That is very good. We could continue on this topic, but because of time we should move on. Lord Hannay wants to turn to the particular aspect of Iran.

Q191 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** We have not talked about Iran at all. Are there any indications that the Government's very clear support for the JCPOA is having any impact at all on the new US Administration? The Prime Minister was in Washington but I do not know whether she raised this issue with the President. Are there any indications that US policy is other than, in the words that came out of the mouth of the President during the campaign, that this was "the worst deal ever" and that it should be junked? Secondly, were we consulted before the Americans put their latest sanctions on Iran as a result of the ballistic missile test? Do you think that that was the right policy? Are we going to follow it ourselves? Thirdly, how will we respond if, as one of our witnesses has suggested to us, the US Administration do not renew the waiver on sanctions on Iran that is in force at the moment in April or May? Will we ourselves continue to apply the JCPOA rigorously, including the suspension of sanctions? How will we try to influence the US Administration not to do something that could be argued is a breach of the agreement that we think is valuable?

The Chairman: I should have said, Minister, that if at any point you want to bring in your distinguished colleagues on these complex questions, please feel free to do so.

Tobias Ellwood MP: Thank you. It is an important question. As I am sure the Committee is aware, this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity with Iran after 10 years of work. Again, it was about a coalition of the willing who stepped forward and who wanted to secure and limit Iran's nuclear capability. The deal was agreed and has come into force. The IAEA has full access to what the Iranians are doing. Regular meetings are held in Geneva to continue assessing progress on making sure that the agreement is honoured. The lifting of nuclear-related financial and economic sanctions relating to the JCPOA are separate to that, in relation to ballistic missile use—the test that took place on 29 January reflected that. We raised concerns about this with the United Nations Secretary-General. That is the process by which we can do that. I understand that he is now considering whether to investigate this further. But there is a separate grouping of sanctions to do with ballistic missiles under UN Security Council Resolution 2231 from those to do with the JCPOA.

Stepping back from both those areas, I would say that there are opportunities for us to engage with Iran. Our embassy has reopened and I had a meeting with the ambassador on Monday. I have visited Tehran and met the Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi. The Foreign Secretary meets his counterpart, Javad Zarif, on a regular basis. There

are phone calls between Hassan Rouhani and our Prime Minister as well. Each of these opportunities is taken to raise other aspects such as human rights, as well as encouraging the country to take this opportunity to re-engage with the international community in a positive way. Airbus is in the process of delivering a series of its aircraft. If you visit Tehran—I do not know whether any of you have been there recently—you will see that this is a country in desperate need of infrastructure improvement and the JCPOA was the green light for that to happen.

There are other challenges to do with legacy sanctions that are perhaps creating issues for American banks or indeed American individuals with any bank when conducting business. We need to work with the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the United States in order to work them through.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: First, may I possibly have an answer to the question of whether we were consulted before the Americans put on the latest sanctions? Secondly, what will the Government's attitude be if the United States moves towards not renewing the waiver?

Tobias Ellwood MP: I do not know whether we were consulted. However, we should recognise that there are EU sanctions and our inability to go through the United Nations on sanctions in breach of the resolution. Moreover, America can impose its own sanctions. Perhaps I may write to the Committee with more detail on that.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: What about our attitude to the waiver? Have you any thoughts on that?

Neil Bush: We can write back on that as well.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I see. You mean that you do not know.

The Chairman: We will come in later questions to the other dark side of Iran, which is its considerable influence on the rest of the Middle East. Just before we do so, Lord Inglewood has a question.

Q192 **Lord Inglewood:** This is about something that we have touched on before. We heard from Tom Fletcher, who obviously is known to you, that, in his words, the FCO is not resourced to do everything as well as it used to do. Clearly there are finite resources to deal with a huge range of difficult problems. What should our key strategic aims be here? Arguably, it is about a choice between bad options. What particular value can we bring to deliver actual changes on the ground?

Tobias Ellwood MP: I think that Tom Fletcher is absolutely right, but were he to have done a study on any other government department following the recession that we went through, he would have found that there was pressure on how its resources were being used. The Foreign Office is no different. However, I would say that given the resource that we have, arguably we are more respected and have a greater reach than any other nation across the world. That says something, given that our budget is significantly less than that of France. It is about the quality of

our staff and the work that they are doing, which is just as important as the resources that go in. We do our best and, with the Chancellor having done time in the Foreign Office, we hope that we will have good news in the future.

I did a study on the embassies that I worked with when I was just looking after the Middle East. I found that for every £1 that the embassy is putting in, it could point to around £5 coming back into the Treasury. You talk about influence. There is a wide package of measures that any embassy or high commission is implementing. One is advancing democracy, human rights and the rule of law and supporting a country in that way, while another is the prosperity agenda that we are embarking on. There are huge and new opportunities in countries such as Angola, which I visited a couple of weeks ago, that perhaps we would not have thought of before. The suppressed oil price is encouraging these countries to diversify. The World Bank has suggested that 20,000 new jobs need to be created almost every day for the next five years because of the growth in population in the continent of Africa. There are great opportunities for Britain.

There are also the security aspects in this. There are the non-state actors that I mentioned, such as al-Shabaab in the south of Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria. We have the skill sets, the experience and the ability to encourage other nations to work with us, whether through UN organisations or others, to help those countries better understand how they can provide the security that they need. Then through our DfID aid packages we are able to provide livelihood schemes and thus stop people from joining the gang. There is a reason why people join al-Shabaab in the south. It is an indigenous force that has not come in from anywhere else. It is because nothing else is going on. There is no local economy or local jobs for them to take up, so they end up joining an extremist gang, perhaps caring less about the religious aspect but knowing that they will be given a gun to make them feel important, and they will get a wage. That is the challenge that we are facing and I think that Britain has an important role to play in supporting these countries in that field as well.

The Chairman: Minister, you have mentioned DfID, a department that is next door to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with huge resources. Do you ever feel that the time might come for a closer relationship between the FCO and DfID in pursuit of the national interest? After all, once in the distant past it used to be part of the FCO.

Tobias Ellwood MP: This is true. I have my own views on that but I will hold back on them. What I would say is that, in the three years that I have been in this job, I have never felt a closer relationship with my DfID colleagues than I do now. I travel with James Wharton to various countries. Rory Stewart and I are holding joint meetings. In fact we held one two days ago on post-conflict Mosul and how the governance part and the aid package element can work together from a stabilisation perspective. It is important that we work together. There was a time, which you might remember, when our aid went out and they deliberately

did not even put a British flag on it. I thought that that was wrong. We should promote Britain's efforts because ultimately we support UK plc in what we are doing. We engage with and develop a relationship with that nation. I agree absolutely that it is important that these funds should tie in with the foreign policy strategy. As I say, that is through our ambassadors and our high commissioners and, indeed, through ministerial-level work. That is happening on a much wider scale.

The Chairman: You have described in detail the ways in which we are involved through soft power, but our troops and Special Forces are scattered across the whole region.

Tobias Ellwood MP: I hope you understand that I cannot say a lot about that.

The Chairman: Yes, but nevertheless there is an impression that strategically we are standing back and leaving the play to Russia and Turkey. We are not one of the great powers in the region anymore. Is that a totally false view which you reject?

Tobias Ellwood MP: Which region are we talking about?

The Chairman: I am talking about Syria in particular, where Russia and Turkey seem to be making all the running, certainly in Geneva, Astana and elsewhere. Where are we in all that?

Tobias Ellwood MP: Specifically on Syria, I do not agree. We need to say more about what Britain is doing, which is actually why it is helpful to have these discussions. Britain is involved. We are the penholder on Yemen, for example, and there is the work that we do, which is not always visible, on making sure that humanitarian aid gets to the people who actually need it, and to encourage them back to the table.

I turn to the work that we are doing in Iraq as Daesh is pushed out of Mosul. We do not want to see the insurgency regain a foothold, so that we have to return to that city for the third time. A huge amount of work is being done in a number of countries. We should not forget that Russia has a long-term interest in Syria. When the country gained its independence in 1946, the Russians were the first in there to help support the fledgling nation build up its new armed force. It is how they got their bases in Tartus and Latakia, and they have invested in Syria ever since. I think that Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, spent time in Russia and that a daughter was born there. There is a bond with the country that perhaps is glossed over.

The Russians want to have a longer-term involvement and interest. But our opportunity was lost in 2013, and not just Britain but the international community needs to regain the initiative by ensuring that talks take place under the banner of the United Nations to try to advance the work that we are doing. We held the Syria conference last year, which collected more donations in a single day than any other conference to support the people of Syria itself. We have done an awful lot of work

with the International Syria Support Group, and indeed with the opposition coalition, to advance the talks and make them happen. We are engaged, but I would say that perhaps we should do more to make it clear what that engagement is.

The Chairman: This is all fascinating, but in the interests of time we must push on. Baroness Coussins wants to touch on a specific issue.

Q193 **Baroness Coussins:** I want to ask you about arms sales to Saudi Arabia. As you will be aware, quite a head of steam has been building up and putting pressure on the Government both within Parliament and outside among NGOs and others looking for a suspension of our arms sales to Saudi. That pressure is particularly in the light of evidence of humanitarian violations in Yemen. We have heard from at least one witness in the course of our inquiry who said that he believed that our arms sales to Saudi were actually responsible for extending the conflict in Yemen, yet we do not seem to be inclined to take any action to suspend such sales.

At the same time, diplomacy does not seem to be having much of an effect either. Do you agree that the current situation is untenable and unacceptable, and what do you think the UK could and should do? If the Government's face is set against a suspension of arms sales, could something short of that be done? Could there be some kind of warning shot to Saudi Arabia, perhaps along the lines of what the Obama Administration did? What are our options, and what do you think we might do?

Tobias Ellwood MP: It is a big question and I will do my best to focus in on the answer. First, had the coalition that Saudi is leading not stepped in at the request of President Hadi, there is no doubt that the Houthis would not only have pushed through to the capital city, Sana'a, they would have made it down to the port of Aden and you would have a failed state there now as well. It is simplistic to say that it is about the Houthis or the Zaidis in the north versus President Hadi in the south. This is a very complex tribal structure of different tribes supporting different alliances. Secessionist movements in the south and myriad terrorist groups are also operating there, including al-Qaeda, which actually ran the port of Mukalla for a long time. They were running a city, but that has now changed thanks to the coalition again supporting the Yemeni forces.

UN Resolution 2216 provided the legitimacy to use force to support President Hadi in his request for help and the coalition was formed. Let us be clear that Saudi Arabia has never conducted sustained warfare before. The Saudi Arabians were not expecting it to last so long, much of it has been in the air, and errors have been made, including the funeral strike on 8 October last year. The conservative culture and perhaps a reticence to be open about what is going on have also been a challenge for Saudi Arabia itself.

It is because of our relationship with the Saudis that we have been able to nurture them, first, to create an analysis team to scrutinise what is

actually happening. This means that when an error is made, they will put their hand up and produce a report, and, if it is a genuine error, provide support and compensation for the victims who have been caught up in it. I was in Saudi Arabia last week. I think that 17 investigative reports have come through and more are in the pipeline. Have they been slow in providing those reports? Absolutely they have. Would we have liked to have seen better targeting and co-ordination in what has been going on? Yes, but they have been forced to learn in a difficult way and in a tough environment, and they are very conscious that the world is watching them. I invited the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, to this House. I do not know if any of you had the opportunity to see him, but I will invite him again so that you can put these questions to him. His response when he is asked these very questions is, "Please help us to get better at understanding how we can make sure that the military component in this is improved".

We know that there will not be a military solution to this and we need people to come back around the table. We have been very critical of the errors that have been made. Indeed, I am very critical in the Chamber when I am asked this question. It is important to understand that the coalition's errors have led to the judicial review that is taking place now. I am limited in what I can say because the outcome has yet to come through. From the export licence perspective, this is something that the MoD looks at very carefully. I believe that we have one of the most robust processes in the world and we look to see whether there is a genuine prospect of a breach of international humanitarian law. That determines whether we continue with sales or not.

Baroness Coussins: So in the interim, no action is being considered short of a full suspension of arms sales, which is clearly not on the table.

Tobias Ellwood MP: As I say, we are doing the work. Are you advocating that Saudi Arabia is deliberately breaching international humanitarian law in order to further its advance in the theatre of operations? Our view has been consistent that, as we assess these issues, we do not believe that that is the case. Have grave errors been made? Absolutely they have. Do the Saudis need to improve? Yes, they do. That is why an assessment team has been put together that is producing the reports. However, they have been very slow and I have said that if I am not satisfied with the pace at which those reports come through and the accuracy that we believe they are providing, it would be right for the United Nations itself to take over an independent review of the individual events.

However, I should place this in context, because a lot of the news on this is very one-sided. The Houthis, having invaded the capital itself, have put Ministers under house arrest and detained and abducted people. They are also using child soldiers. They have shelled Saudi Arabia proper, shelled humanitarian convoys and carried out artillery and missile attacks on ships in the Red Sea. It is a much more complex environment than some of the reporting that we get out there makes out. I do not wish to

somehow defend Saudi Arabia, though. You are absolutely right that we must keep the pressure on and ultimately encourage the parties to come back to the table. The G20 Foreign Ministers met in Bonn a couple of weeks ago to advance that, with Rex Tillerson now taking over from John Kerry.

The Chairman: We are running clean out of time. I know that Lord Hannay wants to speak, but there are two issues that I would like to tackle in the next five minutes, which is all we have. First is the big issue of our friends in the Middle East, the Gulf states.

Q194 **Lord Grocott:** I have not heard recordings of the Foreign Secretary's speech not so long ago, but I have read the text, and it seems to have been characteristically flamboyant, talking about being back east of Suez—not an understated speech by any means. Some of us around this table can remember when we withdrew from east of Suez when Denis Healey was involved in these matters. I would like your observations on what the balance is now. We seem to be getting more involved with the Gulf states at the same time as we are trying to soften relations a little with Iran, developing commercial links and all the rest of it. The Gulf states do not like this very much, and I dare say the Iranians are not too keen on Britain east of Suez. I would like to know where the balance lies now, particularly since some of the evidence that we have had has been that whatever the language between the Gulf states and Iran might be, in practice a lot of commercial activity goes on between them.

Tobias Ellwood MP: This is very important question. The Gulf Cooperation Council is very important to us. We were particularly pleased when the Prime Minister was asked so early on to participate in the GCC summit in Bahrain, where she laid out the importance of that relationship. It is a historical relationship that works incredibly well, and it works both ways. We have over 5,000 businesses operating in the Emirates. Qatar invests more in this country, the UK, than anywhere else in the world, and the Shard is an example of that.

However, you touch on the wider regional picture, and I alluded to this earlier. I think it is in everybody's interest to recognise that we need to move on from the cold war that has existed between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf nations. Countries such as Kuwait are looking carefully at how we can progress on this. There are wider challenges that now unite everyone—Daesh and al-Qaeda, for example, and the extremism with which Islam is being hijacked, which I touched on. It is in everyone's interest to work together to defeat that. In the same way as you have Israel, Jordan and Egypt moving forward and developing an economic agenda, so there is the prospect of a prosperity agenda that could be advanced once a long-term agreement had been made. A Saudi initiative has also been put forward. So I see things happening behind the scenes, but there is a long way to go yet.

Ultimately this is a question not of Shi'ite doctrine versus Sunni doctrine—both groups believe in the centrality of the Prophet Muhammad—but of politics. There is a slight difference over whether it is

the fourth caliph or the first you should focus on—the father-in-law or the son-in-law, I think it is—but today this is ultimately a political question. There is a role for Britain to play, given our historical interest in the area and the trust that we are engaging with and developing.

The Chairman: You are touching on one of our central issues of concern. If the influence of the extreme Wahhabi side and that on the extreme Shi'ite side of the Revolutionary Guards and the extremists could fall away, I agree that in the middle comes hope. We would love to develop that theme, but we do not have time because we promised to let you go in one minute, and Baroness Smith still has a question to ask.

Q195 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** Minister, at the outset you mentioned non-state actors and then outlined five strands of counterterrorism against Daesh. To what extent do you think those five strands work against the non-state actors that are emerging and at times allying with ISIL? Are we on top of the insurgency movements, or is there more that we still need to do?

Tobias Ellwood MP: I think we are very much on top of the insurgency movement in Iraq and Syria. The problem is that when we squeeze that we are seeing them disappear to other parts of the world. The threat of extremism will not disappear. Indeed, where you have vacuums of governance you will see those fighters moving elsewhere to promote their cause. We have seen that in Derna and Sirte in Libya, for example, with the Khorasan group, and we have seen Daesh move towards Afghanistan. This is a discussion that the 68 nations that came together to counter Daesh are now having. We are meeting on 21 March in Washington, where all the Ministers will come together. The key question is how the experience of these five areas can be considered to expand not just to deal with Iraq and Syria but to venture further for the very reasons that you have given: that this is not just confined to this arena.

The Chairman: Minister, I promised to let you go at 12.30 pm. It is 12.31 pm, so I have failed by a minute. We have left all sorts of fascinating themes unresolved. You are in the middle of a process that not only is complex and full of moving parts but is filled with all kinds of questions that none of us is yet in a position to answer. However, you have put a strong, very well-informed and robust view of the problems as you see them now. That is immensely helpful to us and we are grateful. We would like another hour of your time but we cannot have it. Thank you very much.

Tobias Ellwood MP: I would be happy to return. I am a servant at your beck and call.