

British Council
Building Resilience to Radicalisation in MENA
Evidence Session
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Committee

David Warburton (Chair)

Stephen Gethins

Baroness Hodgson

Baroness Suttie

Witness

Tobias Ellwood MP, Minister for the Middle East and Africa, FCO

Chair

Welcome all and thank you very much for coming. Tobias, thanks particularly to you for coming. It is very kind of you to spend the time enlightening us about what is going on and about government policy. We do have apologies from Stephen Kinnock and Lord Purvis. I think there are some other people that may be coming as well in due course, I hope. We have got a little bit less than an hour. The minutes of this will be made public. It is part of our ongoing inquiry into building resistance to radicalisation and extremism as part of the All-Party Group for the British Council.

This is our fourth session. Our first was about looking at research and the academic perspective, and then we talked about how organisations are responding to building resilience. Then we talked about education and skilling, and then we talked about culture. Therefore, this is indeed our fifth session. It is government policy that we are interested in today, how the FCO are operating, and what successes, challenges, failures and so on are being experienced. Tobias, if you might be able to talk a little bit about those that would be terrific. I am not sure if you are inclined to do so, but if you are able to that would be lovely.

Tobias Ellwood

I presume you would like me to talk about North Africa.

Chair

I should have said, sorry, it is the areas of the Middle East and North Africa regarding policy.

Tobias Ellwood

I will perhaps set the scene, which might prompt some further questions about Britain's engagement and some of the challenges that we are facing. What is dominating domestic politics at the moment is Brexit, and a question of the role Britain is looking to assume on the national stage. The Prime Minister has made it clear in her Philadelphia speech that Britain wishes to continue in that role. It has the aspiration and indeed the means to play a significant role in world affairs, and recognises that we have a history, a relationship, an interest and a commitment to understand the world around us. We are to continue to develop that, whether it is through the Commonwealth countries, NATO or through deployment of DFID funds, or indeed our interests in security.

Britain punches above its weight in comparison with other countries. We are recognised arguably as the leading the world in soft power. It is this combination of a trust of transparency but also of hard power as well to back up when needed. There is recognition of wanting to understand the people that we seek to influence and the direction in which we want to go in promoting 21st Century values. Specifically to the region that we are talking about, we are facing huge turmoil across the Middle East and North Africa post Arab Spring. We have to work and encourage work through international organisations where we take a leading role, such as our membership of the UN Security Council.

There is no doubt, as I am sure we will explore in today's meeting, that the challenges remain enormous. You have poor governance. You have insurgent growth and insurgency, and perhaps most worrying in the long term is the absence of education for a growing generation of younger people. There is huge unemployment as well. These are the challenges that not only we face today but will be the legacy issues that we will be seeking to confront in the years to come.

Stephen Gethins

Thanks, Minister, for coming along to join us today. On the points that you raised there in terms of the UK's role, it is interesting that you picked up in your point about the Commonwealth and the role of the UK has a soft power. It was good to hear you talking about that. I noticed that you started your comments with your remarks about what happens after leaving the European Union. Obviously, when you are dealing with these regions one of the strengths historically with the European Union has been the ability to draw on the French experience elsewhere, and they can draw on the UK's experience and so on. What discussions have gone on so far with European partners in terms of how this might look in the future? Is there a continued commitment to work with European partners in the MENA region on this particular issue?

Tobias Ellwood

Yes, I think it is fair to say that firstly the consequences of us departing the European Union as an organisation. As everyone will be aware we will strike a new relationship, but we are one of the big three European countries. We lead on areas such as defence, aerospace, intelligence and policing. We have the strongest relationship with the United States as well. The depth and reach that we have across the world means that European countries will want to remain engaged with us in dealing with a lot of the challenges across Africa, the Middle East and indeed elsewhere as well. What I will say though is that even with the good intentions of the European Union, it is often the coalition of the willing that step forward to meet the challenges that are posed in any one circumstance.

The best example of that is Ebola in West Africa. We, along with other nations, were willing to do more than perhaps other nations were in order to make that commitment. Whilst the EU as whole collectively put some funds together, it was Britain that made a commitment, particularly to Sierra Leone along with some other individual countries, rather than the United Nations, although those vehicles were used. That was likewise with the Iranian nuclear deal. It is nations that step forward, which may be part of or not of other international organisations, groups and so forth. Our role and our intention to be a part of that debate and influence that debate remains unchallenged.

Stephen Gethins

On the Ebola question, which is a very good one to raise, things were done to scale. Where do you see the benefits of doing things on a larger scale? When you talk about the coalition of the willing, putting the European question to one side, who would you identify as key partners on this particular topic? Who would you identify as your key partners in a coalition of the willing when you are tackling radicalisation across Europe and elsewhere in the world as well? How would you use the benefits of trying to do this on a bigger scale as well when you are trying to pull together that broader coalition?

Tobias Ellwood

I believe this the biggest challenge that we face in 21st Century: this ability for a peaceful religion to be hijacked in the way that it has been done through taking advantage of the absence of education that I touched on before. There are those that are making promises of a fast-track to Paradise on condition that they participate in extremist violence. You could say that it affected by religion, or you could say it is not enough religion because what they are doing is not religious. It is people assuming the word of God as if God needs them to get their message across. This is affected because of the internet. It is in every bedroom and every family, in every Mosque, in every pulpit across the world, as to how we judge and how we manage this. It is important that we get the right messages across.

We were one of the first countries to form the international coalition against Daesh, when the growth of this organisation grew and matured. We've been challenging it on five themes to do with firstly on the military capability to defend areas where Daesh itself are trying to establish its own caliphate to support from a humanitarian and stabilisation effect in places like Tikrit to Mosul. Once these places are liberated we must stop the flow of money coming from the various sources across the world and to stop of the flow of foreign fighters, and to actually identify who might be vulnerable in Britain as well as other places. Also importantly, when I touched the internet, are the strategic communications. It is about how we can tear down these internet sites very quickly and place better messaging up there, which does identify and recognise the world according to Islam, which does not sit at all with what the message of these extremists is.

Stephen Gethins

In terms of the coalition, who do you see as your key partners? Who is the coalition of the willing, and do you think you have adequate resources at the moment?

Tobias Ellwood

It is a rather big question, because it depends on which areas we are talking about. We have struck key partnerships across the Gulf with the GCC nations and across North Africa as well. The counter Daesh coalition is now over 60 strong. There is a working group of 20 which are perhaps doing more or the heavy lifting, but we share information. For example, in co-chair the Strategic Communications Group, a sub-group that looks at how we counter the messaging of extremist organisations now. We share that capability.

In the Foreign Office now we have secondees from different countries from Canada to Bahrain and so on. The work that we are doing to help protect the vulnerable is shared across the piece with other nations as well. Many other nations do not necessarily have our experience. We have a prevent strategy as well that you will be familiar with. The vulnerable, whether they are in prisons or perhaps are those to be influenced at universities or those whose station in life means that they are more vulnerable, and there are even mentally ill people who can be persuaded that they will be given a change to enter paradise if they take on these roles. This is the work that we are doing with our allies.

Chair

Are you in touch with governments in the region in the Middle East and North Africa all the time so that the FCO you can understand their priorities?

Tobias Ellwood

It is important to recognise that we have had our challenges here with the 7/7 attacks that took place, and we are familiar with the attacks in Paris, with the latest one taking place at the weekend. There are similar challenges that have taken place across the Middle East, and each of those countries has their own domestic approach to dealing with that. It is also about collectively sharing capabilities so that we can recognise who is moving backwards and forwards and what information is taking place so that we can identify the ringleaders in order to hold them to justice. Depending on which country you are talking about there will be packages of measures from everything that we are doing on counterterrorism to improve policing to general messaging.

There are three aspects of countering extremism. There is what governments can do, and I have described a little bit about what happens there. There is what communities can do. What is being said in the pulpit? What is being said in the family? What is being said by the grandmother or grandfather? Have the mother or father noticed whether people around them are vulnerable or showing signs that they might have been recruited?

The third aspect of this is the private sector itself. As I say, when we look back at Al-Qaeda and how they got their message across, they would simply hand over a video to CNN, and that would be how they would broadcast their message. Now we see terrorist groups as the norm creating their own media messaging and creating their own website, magazines and publications. That is where we require the private sector to recognise that Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube can be used as those vehicles as forms of communication. I have to say that they are now working very closely with us to prevent the messaging being put through.

Chair

The UK Government itself can influence communities on the ground through these sort of soft initiatives as well. It is a mixture of soft power and hard power.

Tobias Ellwood

Absolutely, it is very important that we do train everybody. There are initiatives that have put through schools, through prisons and through other communities as well to, on the one hand, support people as to what the positive messaging is about. It is the difference between right and wrong and the consequences of believing what you say: of making that trip to Syria, for example, thinking that you are going to be treated as a hero if you sign up to Daesh, when quite the opposite is true. It is important that we continue to work in that front, not just on what we are doing here but also what other countries are doing. Each country develops its own approach, and then through the regular meetings that we have we share that information as to what best practice can be used across the piece.

Baroness Hodgson

What are the FCO's priorities and focuses towards supporting the MENA region? You talked about the enormous challenges. I see it is easier to help promote something like education, clearly dealing with bad governance and corruption can be quite hard from here. You touched on huge unemployment, which is of course an issue everywhere at the moment. It is very hard even here to get your first job. How can you help them with that?

Tobias Ellwood

You are right, it is important that the efforts that we put not only have been thought through but form part of a wider strategy and dovetail in with what other parts of the international community are doing as well. Capacity building is very important for us to focus on to make sure that the countries themselves take on the very capabilities that we have in meeting the challenges today. Support for civil society is also critical, and, again, the British Council does an awful lot of work on that front. It is promotion of free media and responsible media too. Practical support and diplomatic engagement is also an aspect that we are working on to promote economic reform and also drive in competition, innovation and the growth of private business.

We also see the role of education as being absolutely critical to give the nations the skillsets so that they can then be the workforce of the future and not feel that they have to abandon their own country in order to go somewhere else to find work or indeed education. Finally, we would be supporting the security forces themselves so that they are able to recognise the difference between good and bad. They can provide that umbrella of security for which these other activities can actually take place.

Baroness Hodgson

Do you have a gender balance in this? Do you push for as many girls to be educated as boys in all these areas?

Tobias Ellwood

That is a very wide question. If I may, I could probably write to you with more details as to how we do try and pioneer that as best as we can. For example, Staffan de Mistura in the Syria peace talks has had a series of meetings specifically with leaders and stakeholders from the female communities deliberately to make sure that their voices are heard. That is partly because, as you will be aware more than others, in some of the countries we are dealing with they do not necessarily have the same values and approach to the inclusivity of women as well. It is very important that their voices are heard. I would go further to say that in some of these war-torn areas the women actually have greater influence than the men. Often the young children will listen to the women, and the women will have more say in the family community than the men will in certain areas. They must not be left out.

Baroness Hodgson

Unfortunately Mr de Mistura has not got the women at the peace table yet.

Tobias Ellwood

No, but this reflects the example. Because they were not at the peace table then he went around and decided that he was not satisfied with it. That I am afraid reflects the attitudes of those people at the peace table whose focus is simply to provide the parameters towards a governance structure that will work. They do not have the same standards as we do today, but we also have to bear in mind that it has taken us a number of generations, and in fact it is less than 100 years ago that women were given the full right to vote in this very place.

Chair

I have got some questions that have come from Lord Purvis, who is in Iraq. He asks, 'What programmes has the FCO seen, either delivered by themselves or by others which they consider effective in the region?'

Tobias Ellwood

In Iraq specifically?

Chair

No, in the MENA region.

Tobias Ellwood

It is a very wide ranging question. If you like, I can provide some more detail in writing, because depending on which country we are talking about we have numbers of programmes varying from support in improvements in governance structures, through the Westminster Foundation of Democracy, for example. The British Council does a huge amount of work on education. We have direct take in Bahrain. We are doing a huge amount of work with their ombudsman processes and their justice reform packages. Each country we try and tailor and identify what is needed to be able

to improve things in that particular area and what we can provide in connection, I should say, with other programmes run by the UN or indeed other organisations.

Chair

Is there a way of measuring success or failure of these programmes? How do you establish whether or not we are achieving anything at all?

Tobias Ellwood

It depends on the package of measures, but you are absolutely right that there must be processes in place. Ultimately, these are being paid for by the taxpayer. We want to make sure that this is wisely spent. There has been a lot of criticism about certain DFID funds going into questionable programmes. We do try and make sure that we have tried and tested methods. It often is not us that necessarily run the programme, and we go through United Nations' programmes as well. We do try and make sure that there is vigour in the system to see that we are getting value for money.

Chair

There is some sort of process of auditing.

Tobias Ellwood

I would like to think in a generality basis that all programmes are subject to review. I hope that is very much the case. If they are not then I would like to see that changed.

Baroness Suttie

I will return to Jeremy Purvis' question, and to go into a more personal level. I know that you were in Hammamet for the British Council conference not last year but the year before. On the ground have you witnessed any soft power and culturally based programmes that you personally have felt have been very effective that you would like to tell us about.

Tobias Ellwood

I think the education programmes are particularly useful of investing our time and energy into the next generation, and getting them to fully understand the work around them and give them hope as to where they want to go. That is absolutely critical. The region has to create over 60 million jobs in the foreseeable future, and in order to do that you then need to have the necessary workforce. With a quarter of 25 year olds currently unemployed at the moment, this is a time bomb that we are facing. That is why it is important that we give people the skills that they need.

Baroness Suttie

Do you think culture specifically has a role to play?

Tobias Ellwood

Absolutely. It is important that the identity of society through culture is able to flourish. It is what gives you the personality of a community, town, city or indeed a country.

Chair

With the unemployment state that you mentioned of many countries in the region, how can we from here encourage economic reform or economic growth? How can the FCO lay down roots that are going to grow into something economically from such a distance?

Tobias Ellwood

It is important to recognise what the strength of the country is, and then working with organisations such as the World Bank or indeed the IMF to actually identify the programmes. We would not necessarily be doing the homework ourselves to say economically the country should go in one way or another. We have opportunities for example in Iraq, where we would have Treasury advisors going into the country to assist in reforms to improve financial services themselves, and provide greater opportunities economically. Ultimately, each country will have its own strengths and weaknesses. Again, we try and tailor the package accordingly and in line with what the other international organisations might be recommending.

Chair

Do you think that we have had any failures and things that have not gone so well in any those countries?

Tobias Ellwood

Yes. There are always going to be setbacks there will be individuals or leaders that will perhaps have different ideas as to how money should be spent or where things should go. There are also aspects of drought. Somalia is a country where we are trying to show further leadership in that. We are holding a conference on Somalia and bringing in a lot of the donors. There are a number of countries that are providing the security forces. There are other countries that are providing funds, and there is huge advancement that is to come.

We have just had one of the biggest crop failures that the country has seen for many years. Famine is affecting that country, and likewise, with the absence of good governance in South Sudan. It is more complicated than perhaps you read in the papers. There is not just the government and the main opposition but across the country there are conflicts taking place on a very micro basis as well causing huge hardship. This is manmade. There is a huge failure there despite all the efforts of the international community to try and resolve matters.

Baroness Suttie

With development aid constantly coming under threat from *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express* and *The Sun* on a regular basis, how would you as Minister for the MENA region make the case to your angry *Daily Mail* reader that this was money well spent?

Tobias Ellwood

I do not think it is coming under threat. I would not agree with that. I would say that the papers, quite rightly, are demanding that the funds to be spent wisely.

Baroness Suttie

I think they are calling for it to be reversed in *The Daily Mail*.

Tobias Ellwood

You said that it is, 'coming under threat'. I do not believe that it is. I think the will of this Parliament of all parties is very much to support the 0.7% spend. It is something that we can be proud of. We should recognise that if we help the countries help themselves then they are in a far stronger position to deal with the challenges that they are facing. If we do not then their challenges become ours from a security perspective, from a refugee perspective and an economic perspective as well.

DRC, for example, is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is war-torn. It could be one of the richest countries in the world because of the mineral wealth there. If we help that country realise where it can go and what it can be then everyone wins. It becomes a stable country. It could become a beacon for economic development, but that requires support from outside. It will not be able to do it on its own because the conflict is so rife.

It is in our interest to help the DRC, because if it goes wrong there it then effect other countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, the Republic of Congo and Angola. Where will those people go? They will flee that country and it will also affect some of the imports that we have coming to our country as well. The good readers of *The Daily Mail* I think recognise that when the wider picture is put to them. Quite rightly what they do not want to see is perhaps money wasted, as we have seen over the last couple of decades.

Stephen Gethins

As well as the financial aspect, which is obviously important, what do you think the UK in particular has to offer the region in terms of its insights and experiences? What is unique to us? I am also wondering if on that you could reflect on – I know that Baroness Hodgson raised the issue of engagement with women. Could you tell me about what interaction you have had with the Scottish Government in terms of their work to support Syrian women in the Syrian peace process for instance, and the invitation that came from Staffan de Mistura a few months ago to work with them? On those two issues would be quite helpful.

Tobias Ellwood

On the latter part, I have had no direct engagement with the Scottish Government on this. If there is work that is being done that comes from particular aspects I am always to look at it. I do not actively go out and seek whether one comes from one part of Britain or another. I go out there as UK Plc, if you like, and the British Government rather than trying to salami slice wherever it comes from in Britain itself.

Stephen Gethins

Given that the envoy and deal was working in cooperation with the First Minister on this issue I would have thought that it was something that you were aware of, especially given the question that was raised around the role of women. I can send you details about that.

Tobias Ellwood

I would be delighted to hear about it.

Stephen Gethins

I am surprised you were not aware of it.

Tobias Ellwood

As I say, I do not actively go out to see whether something comes from Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, or indeed from Cornwall. I see this as if it is worthy of doing and promoting and supporting then that is exactly the road I will go down. I am afraid I do not venture down the devolutionary avenue too much. I would be delighted to learn about any aspect that may be coming. Ultimately, we want Britain to be able to continue using its soft power, which is the more important question. We are trusted. We are seen to have a deep relationship with many parts of the world, right across Africa and even indeed the Francophone countries as well. I was in the Ivory Coast last week, and all the bananas that you find in Tesco come from the Ivory Coast. A third of the power that is generated in that country is generated by British power companies.

There is an awful lot more that we can do right across the piece. Particularly, ironically, they are saying, 'Post-Brexit we hope to see more of you.' In the ECOWAS countries many of them have their own single currency and the GCC nations, for example. These are great opportunities for us to establish trade deals from a British perspective and to be able to take advantage from an economic perspective. Wider afield, again, our armed forces have got strong relationships through Sandhurst with Gulf nations as well. The cadets and officers come and train in this country, and we go out and train their as well. We are raising standards as to how 21st Century conduct of war takes place. That is in policing as well and for human rights too.

Now, it can be that some of these countries are very new and have only been around for the last 70, 50 and in some cases a couple of years. If you think of the length of time it has taken us to develop the standards that we have, we have to be patient in recognising that it will take them time to mature into the centralised form of governance that we now enjoy with the standards that we commend.

Stephen Gethins

It is good to see we are unique. I will send you the details, but Staffan de Mistura has already been quite praiseworthy of the Scottish Government in its work here. I would encourage you, Minister, to associate yourself with that as well. How do you see your priorities developing over the next few months, or let us say the next three year period, in terms of this crucial period where we will be at a crossroads of UK foreign policy?

Tobias Ellwood

I just touched on post-Brexit and gave some examples of where important trade deals can be made and that is what is going to happen. That is not my Department. That will be one for you to quiz Liam Fox and his Department as well. We make firm recommendations as to where we believe there are opportunities for Britain to expand into. We remain an active and important member of the UN Security Council, and we need to be working with our allies to resolve some of the challenges that the Middle East continues to face in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and indeed the Palestinian and Israeli peace process too.

We will continue to engage on these matters. We do not have the might of the United States but we are recognised, because of our depth of interest that we take, of providing alternative thought, looking into aspects at different angles and using that soft power. We are also trusted. We are seen as a place that people want to engage in and also a place that people want to come to. London and Britain is attractive. Leaders come here because of a myriad of reasons. We have a lot to share, and I think the opportunities that we face there are challenges but there are also opportunities in equal measure.

Baroness Suttie

I was just looking at the list of the FCO's five streamed approach for defeating Daesh, which you presumably are already familiar with. Do you think the balance is correct there between soft and hard power measures?

Tobias Ellwood

If I have any concerns it is the importance of post conflict stabilisation. It is something that we in Britain spend a lot of time thinking about. I personally have written publications on this. I think it is very important that we do not treat a battlefield as one where you defeat the enemy and then simply walk away. I think it was General Petraeus that said in his counter insurgency manual that that is not good enough. You have to enable the local, and if you do not enable the local to be able continue and then defend their own territory to economically move their territory forward then that area, community and state will continue to be vulnerable to outside forces or indeed discontented internal forces as well.

East Mosul has already been liberated. West Mosul is on the move as well. It is very important that the governance structures are then put into place that recognise the needs of the various tribal structures that you have there, and are tied into the support with Baghdad, otherwise we will go around this for a third time. This is a city that was affected by Al-Qaeda, then by Daesh, and if we do not get it right the next generation of extremism will take over. That is the piece that I believe that we need to work harder at.

Baroness Hodgson

And in the context of your five-streamed approach, how is the FCO stemming the flow of foreign fighters and stemming money going in there, and stopping them taking over banks and using oil reserves and all sorts of thing? What can we do from here?

Tobias Ellwood

It is an important question. There have been a series of UN Security Council resolutions that have obliged countries to be more aware of funds that are coming through. Everybody gets asked more questions when you are transferring funds from one country to another to make sure you understand where it is going and where it has come from too. I am afraid there are individuals and rich individual families who want to continue supporting organisations such as Daesh or Al-Nusra or indeed Al-Qaeda as well.

The banking systems are far better appraised to be able to prevent this from actually happening, but you have also got to remember that these extremist groups make money through the sale of antiquities. They make money through the sale, horribly enough, of body parts and things like that as well as illegal oil movements and so on. There are aspects of the movements of funding that continue to need to be checked. That is just one aspect of cutting off the ability for terrorism to be able to conduct its exercises.

Baroness Hodgson

What of the arms flow?

Tobias Ellwood

The arms flow is also another important aspect of it. Again, there are a lot more checks and balances that have come into place. Unfortunately, a place like Libya has more weapons in it than people because unfortunately when there are changes in administration or coups that take place places are overrun, or there are weapon systems that come in. In the case of Daesh a lot of people are killed by improvised weapon systems: by IEDs and so forth, which are simply made because the ingredients or the mechanisms to do it are to be found on the internet.

Chair

You mentioned, 'enabling the local', which is a nice quote. How do we do that? You talked about setting up governmental organisations through enabling people to govern themselves, but is that financial as well? In what other ways can we enable them post conflict?

Tobias Ellwood

We are doing work with the UNDP, for example, and indeed other NGOs to ensure that there are the governance structures that can deal with the transition process. Already we are seeing demands to say, 'We want our electricity back on. We want our water suppliers working', in eastern Mosul. It is important that the changes take place, otherwise they will start saying, 'Actually, life was pretty ruthless under the last regime, but at least it was safe and at least the lights were on occasionally.' It is very important that we are able to make sure that that ability for the community to function that way does change.

The core of this, as I am sure you will be aware, is the difference of opinion between Baghdad under al-Maliki, which was Shiite dominated and the north in Nineveh Province which was Sunni dominated. Baghdad did not give enough support to the moderate Sunnis, and because they were

not receiving enough support they then turned to a more extreme and ruthless organisation which did support the Sunni interests. That is what we need to overcome.

We need to make sure that it is not dominated by one form of Islam or another. In fact the difference between the two today is actually more political than it is religious. They both believe in the absolute centrality of the prophet Mohammad. There is very little difference between them today, and it is actually political, and political flags are flown to highlight those differences. It is very important that people are encouraged to feel Iraqi rather than Sunni Iraqi or Kurdish Iraqi or Shiite Iraqi.

Chair

How do we do that?

Tobias Ellwood

That is the big question. This is not easy. This has been troubling this particular region going back to the days of Mesopotamia. There is no doubt about it. It is an extremely rich country. Oil-wise it is one of the richest countries in the world, and even with the suppressed oil price we need to make ensure the vision of where the country can go or where it can be, and the role that it can play in the region. We need to ensure that it is given the chance to flourish. At the moment people's station in life and the challenges that they face are pretty grim indeed. The numbers of orphans in that country is enormous. The numbers of people without education is absolutely horrific. The support that is needed by the international community to be properly coordinated is important at this juncture where it is needed most.

Chair

On the international community support, through diplomatic relations or through the FCO in whatever form, do we actively encourage other countries to step up to the 0.7% of GDP for aid.

Tobias Ellwood

It is something that we are continually doing. We are one of the few countries in the world that meets our 2% NATO target and 0.7% on assistance aid. It is very important that other countries match that as well, including the United States too. There are some very generous countries out there, but there are other countries that could do a lot more.

Chair

Do we encourage them to do so?

Tobias Ellwood

Absolutely. The UN mission does it more than anybody else because that is ultimately the vehicle. It is actually the OECD, which is based in Paris, but nevertheless it is through the UN forum at the Secretary Council where we encourage this to happen, and in the General Assembly.

Baroness Uddin

Apologies. I missed your contribution at the beginning, so this question may have already been asked. I am already aware of your good work and your thoughts on these matters having heard from you in various meetings and I know how committed you are to peace in the region. I want to raise particular point about women, and how to improve the participation of women engaged in post conflict processes. I am sure that Fiona Hodgeson will have said raised this matter already with you.

The other point I wish to make is this, we have done war to destruction. By now we should have developed much expertise about reconstruction. Can you say if there is a post war/conflict team in place who are just as ready to go off and build infrastructures and schools and so on. We need to show leadership which would assist in developing confidence of not just the country itself but also in creating trust. Have we developed sufficiently our own teams and structures so as to provide solutions as response to our leading the rebuilding of country and nation? Is there a response team of peace builders waiting for action as soon as there is ceasefire? Historically we have fallen short, as far as Palestine, India and Africa. Why are we not learning significant lessons given our new found morality about rebuilding nations? Talk of approaching matters from a point of views of a second empire now is a disagreeable state of affairs, when what we should be developing is equal partnerships. I agree with you completely that Britain is held in respect within many parts of the world, despite our unwise intervention there remains a degree of confidence in Britain

Tobias Ellwood

Thank you. You touch on something that is very important. That is the extent to which the international community can go in and oblige or enforce what would be common sense solutions. This has to be, in the case of Mosul that we are focusing on at the moment, Iraqi led. It has to be led by them. They have to be seen to be doing this. However, that should not prohibit us from them being able to work with them to make sure that the World Food Programme can get in to make sure we can distribute the food. The UNDP can go in there and make sure that the refugees are sorted. It is so that our British training of Iraqi forces can go in there to make sure that the IEDs are cleared so that it is safe for people to return, and all of this must happen in a chronological order.

One of the things that we have been pressing the Iraqi authorities on is to make sure that they can map out what happens roughly on a month-by-month basis as the city and the wider area is liberated. You are absolutely right that we should learn from history itself. It does not always work that way because you run into corruption, poor standards or other aspects and challenges that were not necessarily anticipated, or indeed simply because of conflict of interest. There are a number of tribes that live in and around the Mosul area itself. Who should be the next mayor of Mosul? There are two tribes which are already saying right now that their person should be the next mayor.

What we are saying is that we should have a pause and bring in a transition machine that looks after the city and the wider area as a whole, and then hold elections in the near future. I think they come up in Iraq in the next year and a half, so it makes sense then to have all the elections taking place in one go but then nothing beforehand. You actually want to focus on making the place safe and getting it up and running again, and promoting with the support of Baghdad so that extremism will not be allowed to flourish.

I should add to this that Daesh did not take over Mosul. It did not charge in and take it over as you would imagine and invasion. There was a core of western Mosul that had been a no go area for the authorities pre-2014. It ran its own form of extremism, and that is where the Kalifate then started to grow. From there is subsumed the city itself until eventually the authorities abandoned it and then left. We should recognise that these are a lot of people that were inside had just been fed up and decided to go with the better solution than the absence of support that they were getting from Baghdad.

Baroness Uddin

Can I also ask you to clarify the points you make about funding terror, on many occasions you have stated that you know where the individual wealthy supporters provide arms and resources to these conflicts. I do not know whether this is a right place to ask or answer, but if you or our government know who they are and where such illicit funding is coming from why are we as government not doing something about it? What is the truth about that?

Tobias Ellwood

You may want to add onto this, but the best-known example is Osama bin Laden.

Baroness Uddin

That is exactly what I am saying.

Tobias Ellwood

It was a building company, for example; it made an awful lot of money and made the family extremely rich. He himself was a billionaire, and therefore was able to use his funds to do the activities he actually did. There are many people who then move their money outside of countries themselves and are then funding – through cash and other things like that – individuals or activities. That means it becomes harder. What we are seeing, more so than ever before, is the states themselves – such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other nations themselves – being far more proactive in doing exactly as you say, identifying the accounts and who the individuals are, and stopping that happening.

Baroness Uddin

You are also seeing work within the UN on sanctions against individuals where there is clear evidence.

Stephen Gethins

Just to follow up on a question that Baroness Suttie asked earlier on, you mentioned Libya, Minister. Given that Libya is quite a recent example – and I know you have dealt with it in detail yourself during your time in office – what lessons would you take from the aftermath of the conflict

in Libya that you think we should consider in particular in terms of this report? What would be the most striking lessons for you about things that we may have to do better in the future, or things that we may have done well there, too?

Tobias Ellwood

That is a good question. It is worth, firstly, recognising that with Gaddafi being deposed and Britain and France joining together to support the people of Benghazi, there is one school of thought that suggests, 'Well, had we not done all this and left Gaddafi in place, with the blood-bath that would have happened, somehow things would be okay today'. I do not agree with that at all, because it glosses over that there were elections in the country. It had its own Prime Minister, and a President was agreed. A House of Representatives were elected as well. They had structures actually put in place.

What you have in this country is a country that was misruled for 40 years. It is, again, a fairly new country, and when King Idris was overthrown in 1969, Gaddafi was actually a lieutenant at the time. He promoted himself to colonel; he emulated Colonel Nasser in Egypt. He then took over and suppressed society. There are about 35 major tribes, and many sub-tribes, in Libya. In 40 years, they were not allowed to move at all. You then remove Gaddafi, and suddenly they are liberated; they are free, and they all want a bit of elbow room. They all want a bit of flexibility. They all want to express themselves in a way they have not been allowed to, because of the absence of any societal development.

Much as we try and did our best to move the country forward, many organisations were invited to leave because they said, 'No, we are going to sort this ourselves'. Then, sadly, it slid back into civil war itself, and the people, again, of Libya need to recognise their own potential. Again, it is another very rich state. There are about eight million people in the country. It is a very flat country, actually; it is mostly focused on the coast itself, and it was three regions. It was brought together by the Italians. It could be a very prosperous country indeed. The irony, actually, of Libya is that because the oil is still flowing, the money is still going into the central bank. All the teachers and even the army and the forces of each side of the battle lines are being paid as well. It is a very phony war. Most of the country is continuing to operate. It is very different to the situation of Iraq.

There is no doubt about it, though, that what is happening with General Haftar now is a new advancement of where this takes us, but I should also say in all frankness that this is a country that has been affected by outside interests of other countries, as well, wanting to back certain winners. Again, we need to focus on providing the necessary support that will allow the country to return to where it was before, but there is a lot of work to do.

Stephen Gethins

Going back and looking at the background is interesting. What particular areas do you think could have been done better? It is helpful, always, to reflect on what could be done better, and I am not entirely sure I agree with you that in some parts of the country, there is a phony war going on. In some parts of the country, there is quite a hot war going on. However, putting that to one side, what lessons do you think we should take from that?

Tobias Ellwood

I did not mean to suggest that there are not hot points in conflicts. Unfortunately, the absence of a centralised governance structure with a focused armed forces has allowed – as we often see across the Middle East – the vacuums to occur, and then extremism to start to flourish. We have seen that in Derna, Sirte, and places like this where Daesh has now emerged. That needs to be the wake-up call to the people of Libya, to say, ‘You do not want to go down this road. You need to return to the table and focus on the Presidential Council, and advance a structure that will actually work, recognising the disparate tribal structures that exist across the country.’

Chair

We are almost out of time. Can I ask you what advice you would give to organisations working in the region towards resilience against radicalisation – perhaps the British Council, but also other NGOs – about what they should be doing or what they could be doing better, or how best they could operate?

Tobias Ellwood

This is something that the United Nations is doing a lot of work with, in order to counter the growth of violent extremism. We have added into that with our own examples; I actually touched on that before. The EU is also doing work in this area. It is probably the biggest challenge that we face. We need to be better at coordinating the work of organisations, whether it be NGOs that are investing in communities, in freedom of media and speech, or in women’s rights, and so forth. This is very important to do, because the pace at which extremism is able to flourish in the absence of governance, I am afraid, means that we are not able to keep up. As we squeeze it in one area, it pops up somewhere else, and that is the biggest challenge that we are facing at the moment.

Chair

Absolutely. Do you have any more? In that case, can I just say thank you very much? We are extremely grateful to the Minister for coming for a full hour during what must be an apocalyptically busy schedule. Thank you so much; it was immensely useful, and will go towards our inquiry. We are very grateful.

Tobias Ellwood

Can I just say thank you to you? It is helpful. We go to some of these places and we talk about the role of Parliament, the scrutiny of Parliament and the transparency, and what we are doing here is so critical as an exemplar to the places I actually go. It is good to also know that the work that is being done is scrutinised, but it is also genuinely taken as an interest in both houses of Parliament. Thank you both very much indeed.

Chair

Thank you.

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